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PINNACLE PETE



OR,

THE FOOL FROM WAY BACK.

BY W. R. EYSTER,

AUTHOR OF "HANDS UP," "PISTOL PARDS,"
"THREE HANDSOME SPORTS," "SOFT
HAND SHARP," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE MAN-HUNTERS TAKE THE TRAIL.

"No, the poor boy never had a chance, and I cannot blame him. In his younger days he was the gentlest child you could imagine. I remember him yet, with his blue eyes, golden hair, hanging in a mass of curls over his shoulders, and a gentle smile on his delicate face. That was before mother's death. Alas! when he came into the hands of Uncle William all that was changed."

The speaker, Theodosia Lande, was tall, willowy, young, and looked as though the description of her brother might once have fitted her. She was an heiress, just come to her majority, and she spoke to Serena Wild, her companion.

"Uncle William didn't understand him, and so he bolted. Yes, I understand, if Uncle Wil-

"YOU'RE THE FOOL FROM WAY BACK; AND THAT YOUNGSTER WAS YOUR PARD. HE'S
GOT AWAY, BUT DON'T YOU FORGET THAT WE'VE FROZE ONTO YOU."

liam did not. That sort of boy can't be driven. He either dies or runs away if you try it. He wants to be led gently, or he won't move a step."

"That is it, exactly. For years I heard nothing of him; but it was not his fault. I found out that Uncle William had suppressed the letters he wrote to me. But I have heard of him at last, at some outrageous place in the mines that goes by the name of 'Way Back.'"

"Classical location. I have heard of it also. I think they said it was where they cut throats for a dollar and throw in a coffin."

"I am afraid you describe it only too aptly. I wrote him, begging him to return; but the poor boy is in the toils. He is deluded with the idea of making a fortune 'soon,' and I am sure that he is being influenced by the graceless gang around him. He says they all seem to love and respect him, where he is; that he has a mission there; and that he would only be lost in the conventionalities he would find in the East. As for my money, that I offer to share with him, he says he would sooner starve than touch a cent that was ever in Uncle William's hands; and that while he has a pan and rocker, and the sand yields gold, he is not likely to come to such extremities."

"I am not sure," murmured Serena, "but what I respect him for the sentiment."

"Don't be foolish. He has lost too much of his life already. I have decided. He must listen to reason. I will save him. One cannot put on paper the shades of reasoning that one must use with a willful boy. I am going to find him, and bring him back, *volens volens*."

Miss Wild looked up with a twinkle in her brown eyes.

"You probably remember that this willful boy is some years your senior; that you have not seen him since he was fourteen. Perhaps when you find him he will be as obstinate as ever, and refuse to come. It strikes me that I wouldn't attempt to do more than my duty."

"He will come the moment I step between him and the influences that are at work upon him. I have decided that I will go."

"And I have decided that I will go along."

"No, Serena. It is *duty* that takes me there; but you would have no excuse for thrusting yourself into what I cannot but admit will be danger. I would dearly love to have you with me, but I must go alone."

"Indeed you will not, if I have to bring you before the courts as a fit subject for a Lunatic Asylum. Of course you will have some one to protect you, and that some one can protect me too. Oh, it will be grand! It is the region of all others that I wish to visit!"

The sudden notion of her companion almost staggered Theodosia, yet when it was more fully discussed, she was gradually won over to give her consent. When two persons resolutely set themselves to view only the pleasant side of a question it is not so hard to forget the dangers.

A journey, even across the continent, is no great hardship in these days of Pullmans and through tickets. It was so quickly made that the young ladies had hardly time to realize that there was something of an entirely different nature at the other end before they were face to face with its uncertainties and dangers.

"If your man is ever going to come, now is the time for him to put in his appearance," said Serena, looking disconsolately out of the window of the station, taking in as much as she could of the straggling little town.

"I think I would have arranged to have my guide meet me somewhere within the limits of civilization. We have started now, and can't go back. Just supposing he fails us—or turns out to be some one impossible to accept. You are sure that there was no mistake about place and date? I can tell you, Theodosia, in the language of the little darky, 'the fuder I goes the skeerder I git.'"

"There will be no mistake. For reasons of my own, after looking up the matter pretty thoroughly, it seemed best to me to start from here. The Association promised to have a reliable guide here to take us in charge; and they keep their promises, when there is money to be made. We discussed the unpleasant features of the trip very thoroughly before we started, and now there is nothing for us to do but to ignore them. I am not at all alarmed, and if I was, it would be too late to turn back. Everything is provided for, and in a day or so you will be laughing at your fears."

"Oh, as for that, I have no fears, nor the least idea of turning back; but I confess it does not seem so much of a frolic as it did at a distance. So your detective turns out to be an elderly gentleman, with a family of say nine. I care not for the rest. When do you expect him?"

"He was to be here by four o'clock."

"It is after that time now."

"And here is your detective, ladies. I have been watching you for some moments, though without a doubt that you were the individuals I was to meet. Here is my letter of introduction."

If the heavens had tumbled, Theodosia could scarcely have felt more overwhelmed.

The detective guide was a woman!

"Good heavens! what do they mean?" was

the instinctive exclamation of Miss Wild. "Is this a jest, or are they all lunatics at headquarters?"

"Neither! You see, the gentleman who was to accompany this expedition fell suddenly sick. He was the only staid, sober, middle-aged, married man on the force who would suit your purpose. As I have some little acquaintance near Way Back, and have a straightforward, successful way of doing business, they elected me to fill his place; subject, of course, to your decision. What do you say? Are you afraid to trust me?"

"Are you alone?"

"Perhaps—perhaps not. As I understand it, you are paying well, and the company can afford to look after my safety as well as yours. There may be wheels within wheels. Trust us or don't trust us, just as you choose; but, make up your mind at once!"

It was an important question to decide on such brief notice; but Theodosia was equal to the occasion.

"Your people have a reputation to sustain, and are not in the habit of practical jokes on customers from whom they can contingently expect a large fee. Your letter is perfectly correct, and without further question I will accept your services. I am glad to meet you, Miss Vandeleur, and hope that our journey will be both pleasant and profitable. You are acquainted at Way Back?"

"Hardly. It is beyond the range of my exploration. Yet I know some persons who are not far from there. If I can meet them now our success will be almost secured."

"You know something of the place?"

"A little."

"And perhaps you know Rolland Lande—or at least have heard of him."

The lady detective smiled.

And when she smiled she had a very pleasant face, for the suggestive firmness of her lips was relieved, and there was a twinkle in her eyes which told that her profession had not entirely destroyed a natural taste for the ludicrous.

"If that was the name he carried back East a dozen years ago, and he has since been living in such places as Way Back, I am afraid there will be some difficulty in finding any traces of it now."

"But, he is there; I have been corresponding with him. How else could he get my letters?"

"An arrangement could be easily made, and even the postmaster not know who was the correspondent. As I said, I have a friend near there—Pinnacle Pete. If any one can tell about your Rolland, it will be he. He has known the country for a long time, and everything goes that he says."

"Pinnacle Pete? A strange name."

"Yes, but just right for the man that bears it. He is 'way up, in accordance with the language of the mines."

"And of what sort is he, anyhow?"

"Don't ask me, for I can hardly do justice to him in any description that I might give, if you have not understood what I have already said. He may not be the kind of acquaintance that you would care to make; but he is of value to me, and I hope to be able to see him. Probably I am indebted a great deal to my knowledge of him; without it I would hardly have been sent on this expedition."

"Good-looking, is he?" asked Miss Serena, with a pronounced smile.

"More than good-looking; he is the handsomest man in the mines."

"And is a miner, I suppose?"

"Yes, with cards and revolver. Whether he does anything else than use them he has forgotten to mention. Some say he is a detective."

"Good-looking, a prominent citizen, a man of worth—" said Miss Serena, reflectively. "I think I will cultivate him."

"When you find him."

There was a touch of sarcasm in the tone of the lady detective that made Miss Wild look up quickly and ask:

"Is he so hard to find?"

"That depends. If he chooses he can disappear, bodily and completely, with more celerity than any man I ever knew. And when he wants to be seen he is anywhere and all over. If I had a case against him I suppose I could hunt him down, because I could use extraordinary means; but I wouldn't like to guarantee success in seeking an ordinary interview that he wished to avoid."

While she spoke the young ladies were examining her features more closely than they had yet done.

They were regular, delicately cut and refined. There was a rich bloom of health on her face, and her figure, a little below the medium height, was perfection itself. Altogether, she was a handsome, self-possessed little blonde, tastefully dressed in a plain, serviceable suit, and looked as though she might have plenty of courage, intelligence and endurance.

From the letter of introduction that both had read, they understood that her name was Millie Vandeleur.

Yet Miss Lande did not care to grow too familiar on such a brief acquaintance; and now she spoke somewhat coldly.

"Pinnacle Pete is only a means to an end, and it is not necessary to discuss too closely his private character and qualities. I asked for some one to guide us safely to Way Back, and if necessary find my brother for me—"

"Then, you think it possible that he may seek to avoid an interview?"

The innocence with which Miss Vandeleur spoke could not be offensive; but there was a little thrust about it, nevertheless.

"I think—I know—that he is willing to meet me; but there are others who may desire that he should not. I do not want to disguise the truth. He was a weak, willful boy, who ran away from home because he would not brook the restraint of our uncle, who desired to keep him out of bad company. Some years have elapsed since then, but I fear he is just as easily led away. He intimated to me that he could not see me, and I know no other reason for it. I have come to rescue him from his surroundings and take him home with me. If these men hide him away I want him hunted out."

"If things are as you say, it is only too likely that these men desire you to come. A rich heiress would be worth more to them than a simple-minded youth, who has nothing in his own right. We will have to be doubly careful."

"By the stage, we are bound to attract some attention, of course; but if we went on horseback it would be offering a premium to the agents to hold us up. You will be safer, and I think more comfortable; though, for myself, it makes little difference to me which way we go."

"And the stage starts—when?"

"To-morrow morning. I have already had three places reserved, and made all other arrangements that were necessary. I would advise that you retire early and get a good night's rest. Don't trouble yourself with idle speculations, that will only keep you awake. Plenty of time for them on the road."

"Very well, Miss Vandeleur. We commit ourselves to your guidance."

CHAPTER II.

A BAD FLUSH.

WHILE Miss Lande and her friend were slumbering quietly, four men were sitting together in a tiny little room, not much over a hundred yards away, and these men had, or intended to have, something to do with her destiny.

Each in his way was at least ordinarily good-looking; yet here, when the mask was off, their faces had a wicked, hardened look.

They had been sitting there for half an hour, conversing in a low tone and drinking moderately.

"I don't believe the old man is coming," said one at length, and abruptly. "He's way behind his time; and that means something in the road, unless, Dave, you didn't get it straight."

The speaker was the smallest man of the party, with a straight sharp nose, cold gray eyes, and thin lips, who was known to his friends as Specter Sam, probably from his habit of suddenly appearing or disappearing. He was dressed the most precisely of all, in a suit of black, a 'boiled' shirt, neatly-fitting boots of fine leather, and wore on his variegated silk necktie a blazing diamond of tempting value.

"Don't worry yourself about Dave. When he don't carry such things straight it will be after to-day. Ask Dan the Daisy what Lucifer said to him. If he don't say this was the hour I'll cave and go down to the Comet. There's a tenderfoot there in soak that is just rolling in coin, and bursting with the idea that he knows how to play draw. I'm not wasting a chance like that for any other man on this footstool. But, when Lucifer talks, it means business. I'm waiting, and the old man will be along in due time. It's no use to try to hurry the funeral procession; it'll get to the graveyard all the same."

"Thanks, Revolver Rube," said another voice, at the sound of which they all turned with a start.

"The old man is here now. I didn't want to put any of you to any inconvenience, but it has been some time since we all got together; this movement suited me; and a little thing has turned up, in which we are all somewhat interested. I thought, perhaps, it would be as well that you had pointers, and that we talked the matter over. I can't say that out here there is any likelihood of trouble; but in some places there might be."

Specter Sam got his answer in first.

"It looks mighty much as though we had all got an eye on the same thing. If it hadn't been that I wanted to make sure I would have left my card and gone off about my business. How you knew it I can't say—but then you know everything. It's a good thing you have taken the matter in hand, for now there will be a divvy all around and no danger of a fight. Revolver Rube has been itching to pull and open out on us; Durango Dave has been thoughtfully feeling that knife of his; Dan the Daisy wants to hold us all up, while I'll confess I haven't been feeling as though I wanted to embrace my old pards. Take the chair, captain, and say

what you want. Then we'll come up to the rack, fodder or no fodder, and a heap of slaughter will be saved. We didn't all part very good friends the last time we met, and it will take a hand like yours to straighten us up."

"I've thought of all that, Sam—of course you understand. I have been keeping an eye on you. That's got to stop. Now—business."

"You remember a little job with a tenderfoot some years ago?"

"Dozens of 'em," said Dan the Daisy, interrupting. "All our jobs were with tenderfeet. If you run your finger down the ledger, you'll find a pretty long account opened, and for any particular items we'll have to go to the index."

"Correct, Daniel! We have done a heap of work together, and may do more. I thought perhaps you understood matters better than you seem to. Maybe you'll remember a fair-faced young fellow that we met in Hard Luck, who had made a strike and felt as large as all outdoors. His name was Rolland Lande."

Specter Sam chuckled softly, and in one way or another all showed that the name was not unfamiliar.

"Well, my impression was that he died shortly after our last interview; and I was very well satisfied to retain that impression, and ask no questions as long as the rest of the world didn't. The time seems to have come when those questions are going to be asked."

"Let them ask," growled Revolver Rube. "Nobody else knows anything about him, and I guess we won't talk."

"I'm not so sure of that; and what I wanted to talk about was what we were all going to say."

"If it's my chip, I'd remark—say nothing at all. It's the silent pig, you know, that gets the broth. Of course, there's two words that I have to shout now and then, but I'm trying to educate my tax-payers up to sparing me even that. 'Hands up!' you understand?"

"In most cases that is just the thing—if we want to look after our interests and gather in the coin it won't do in this. There's a heap of coin yet to be made; and we didn't, do so badly in the pool on the first heat. I've been working the case up on my own hook, but when I found you were all gathering in here I thought perhaps it would be better for me to open up down to bed-rock, and take you all in on the ground floor. You understand? I'm giving my game clean away; and I've got to take my chances of your coming in."

"We're all ready to buy land," whispered Specter Sam, and his sibilant tones were barely yet distinctly audible.

"I understand the hint. Talk is cheap. Well, the clearer you understand my platform the better it will be for all of us. I'll tell you just what I have been doing. I didn't think much of the matter at the time, but I don't forget names and dates when I assist at the obsequies, spiritual or financial, of a victim."

"Nice thing to lie awake rainy nights and think over," muttered Durango Dave.

"My lookout and my way of doing business. It comes in handy just now. Some time ago I came in possession of a letter to one Rolland Lande, written by his sister. She had fallen heir to their uncle's estate, and wanted him to come back and share it with her."

"I dropped to the whole inwardness in no time; and as I had very great fears that Rolland would never be able to respond I answered the letter for him. The result is that she has come on to clear up his indebtedness, and take him back to the land flowing with milk and honey. She has a large amount of money and available collateral. There is a fortune in it for one man; there are big stakes in it for five. What are you all doing?"

"That's a good hand to draw to; but it is going to take good cards to fill. You don't suppose she will come out here all alone, and put herself in our hands? You enjoyed the pleasures of the correspondence; did she write as though she was a natural-born idiot?"

"Don't be despondent, Sam. There have been bigger fools than all that, and yet the world didn't know it. You forget that I have been at the other end of the string. She started with another young lady who has been her companion for some years; and they traveled alone. They are in town, and are going down to Way Back like lambs to the slaughter. Now, hands on the board, how many of you had eyes on them?"

"I had a hint that they were on the road," answered Dan the Daisy, speaking up promptly, "and I came here to keep an eye out, as you say. The boys will expect to hold up the cavalcade, and make a little fortune out of it. I'm satisfied to take my share out on the road down."

"And what you leave won't make heavy carrying," put in Revolver Rube. "If you want to see it, here's a letter from a side pard of mine, telling me that such game was afloat."

"I came a hundred miles to get my eyes on the sister of Rolland Lande," added Durango Dave, gloomily. "Like as not she'll prove bad medicine for some of us; but I wanted to be around."

"I felt it in my bones that there was some-

thing going to happen. I didn't know what it was; but it seems I have had my eye on her and her pard ever since they left New York City. If anybody has the claim for a big share Specter Sam is the man."

The leader listened quietly.

"You are all as keen scented as ever after game; but from all that has been said, ten thousand would cover all any one expects to make. That, divided by five, don't leave very much for each. I'll guarantee that, and a fair share of the plunder. How many are willing to cap in for the old man?"

"You needn't put it that way," retorted Specter Sam. "All you have to do is to say the word, and the hand is full—five of a suit, and hard to beat. I don't guess we want to buck against each other, so there's nothing left but to pull together. Read us the orders, and you know what you can depend on. We pulled together ten years ago."

"I knew I could rely on you. It makes a little change in my programme; but that will be all the better in the long run. All I shall ask is that in the future, when you meet Mrs. Eric Rivers, you tell no tales out of school that might suggest a clew to the truth. I don't want the lady to hear a lecture on the advantages by which her liege lord raked in the pot, you understand; I'm going in for keeps."

"I guess that's plain enough for us to sabbe. What cards are you going to throw on the first deal?"

"I don't know anything better than to let Daisy Dan go on with his game. Hold 'em all up, take everything that is available, and set a stiff price on their ears. Give them to understand that they can go and welcome; but if they want to take their ears with them they have to pay a price that is 'way up."

"And where do we come in?" asked Durango Dave, somewhat anxiously. "Dan is square enough, but don't you forget that there is a gang behind him that will want their whack at the proceeds. Dan might turn over his share, but when yer get any current funds or negotiable securities out of the paws of those daisies of his, you can just tell me all about it."

"Man alive! Haven't I been trying to tell you all about it? Let Dan have the skimmings. That ought to set me solid with you all. I'm not worrying about a little pocket in the horsing. I'm after all the ore that is in the lead, and mean to make a clean-up all the way down to bed-rock. You four divide it to suit yourselves, and I'll help you to make your stakes. All I ask is what is left—if it's only the girl herself. Dan can manage his men. As a general thing, they only take what they can get their hands on, and if they are paid for their trouble they won't object to go a little further—if they know they are working for Lucifer Lightning, as he used to be called."

"And how much is there going to be in this play?" asked Durango Dave.

"I said there was from ten to twenty thousand in cash and collaterals. That I am willing to let go to the men who make it. I'm playing for a round, cool million. The pile may be a good deal smaller than I think it is; I may be badly fooled; but I'm willing to guarantee ten thousand each, if you stand by me through thick and thin till the raffle is made."

"And suppose the damsel won't have any of you in hers; how you going to come out square?"

An ominous smile wrinkled Lucifer's handsome face.

"Did you ever hear of my making a failure? When you do will be time enough to ask such questions. I would sooner she would bend; if she won't she must break, and you can bet your bottom dollar I'll be there, gathering up the ends. If I'm out of pocket on the spec, you fellows won't have any occasion to howl. My bank account is good for more than forty thousand."

"Good enough, old man. That's all we need to know, and we're with you all the way and back again. It's just as well to have a clear understanding at the beginning of a job; now that we have that all we want is our orders. If Dan is to hold them up on the road where do the rest of us come in at? You hardly want to mix us up with his gang."

"Let Dan run that part just as he intended to. One of you come with me, I don't care much which one, but Sam might suit, a little the best for the work, I can give him his instructions in five minutes. The rest can go on to Way Back and seek amusement till I am heard from. There's plenty of fun there and you ought to be able to make it pay. You know the camp."

"And the camp knows us. But, if you drop off the trail we'll be taking up the running on our own hook. Don't tarry long if you don't want to see our hands in the game."

"I'll be there about the time the damsel is. If I'm not you can amuse yourselves trying your hands till I arrive."

"And s'posing—I just say, s'posing the real, identicle Rolland Lande shows up? If he lived through the starter we give him there won't be much of the tenderfoot about him by this time. I don't figure on it much, but you've got to keep

an eye on what's most unlikely to happen. Of course I know what I'd do, but I want to catch on to what will suit your hand."

And Durango Dave eyed the captain anxiously as he spoke.

"No need to ask that question," gritted back Lucifer; "cut his throat without delay or remorse."

"That's our platform then. A wedding and a funeral, and curse the difference which comes first."

CHAPTER III.

URIAH TAKES THE WAR-PATH.

"URIAH, I can't tell whether you're not worth your salt; or whether you're keen as a file. How is it? Do you think you're fit to trust on important business?"

Uriah hesitated, rolled up his eyes until nothing but the whites were visible and after a moment of silence, that might have been spent in deep thought, slowly stuttered:

"A-a-I d-d-d-dunno."

"No—and no one else knows! It wasn't worth while to take so long to find an answer. With you the only course is to shut one's eyes and go it blind. So far you've come out at the top of the heap; but, hang me if I wouldn't like to know why! Is it all dumb luck; or is there something in you that the unregenerate can't see?"

"A-a-I d-d-d-dunno."

"There it is, again. Of course you don't know! Since I first stumbled across you—or you over me, which is the sure correct way to put it—you never were dead open and shut sure of a thing that was worth the knowing. If somebody was to ask you who I was you'd give just the same answer."

This time there was a slight change in the programme. Uriah shut one eye—one would almost have sworn with a twinkle of slyness; the other he rolled up as before, while his lips dropped the same specific answer.

"Probably you don't—there's the truth—for once in a while. Now, let me give you your instructions. I'll make them short enough, because there don't seem to be a bit of use to try to tell you how to do a thing. The only plan is to tell you a couple dozen times over what is to be done, and leave the ways and means to Providence, and your own lack of understanding. Somehow, in spite of everything, Uriah generally gets there."

"Wi-wi-with b-b-b-both feet!"

Sidney Campton laughed. The interruption was apropos; and a mine of truth to boot. He looked at the fellow appreciatively, and Uriah, in turn, grinned idiotically.

"I don't dispute the fact," continued Campton, "or I wouldn't say another word. I'll give you the pointers and turn you loose."

"L-l-let her p-p-p-int," said Uriah, amiably.

"In brief, here is your cue. Take the next stage for Coronado; say nothing to anybody, go quietly, keep your eyes open to see if there is any one else on the same errand. If so, avoid him. When you get to the station keep cool and in the shade. Watch the trains from the East. If they are on time on Thursday, two young ladies should get off and make inquiries about Way Back. Don't bother them, but keep your eyes on them. See that they get through in safety. As soon as they arrive let me know."

"Is th-th-that all?"

"That's about all; but if you were a better man, I'd say that you had just about as large a contract as you would want to carry, along around the time you were reaching the end. If it was any one else, I'd have a thousand words of advice; for Uriah, the man of luck, I need only mark the lines, and say, 'Go in and win.'"

"K-k-kerrect," stuttered Uriah, extending his hand—to draw it back again as the other offered to grasp it.

"N-n-none ov that f-f-fool p-p-play. It's k-k-koin thet I want."

"Oh! yes, I forgot. There's a hundred for yourself. Pay your way. And, Uriah, an excuse may be needed for the journey. Save it up till the last minute; but I'll give you a thousand to send to Barr Brothers, in Frisco, to be placed to my credit. Send by express, and bring me a receipt—if they let you get through."

On such brief notice, and with such indefinite instructions, Sidney Campton started Uriah out, on what was undoubtedly an important mission.

At Way Back Sidney Campton was a well-known gentleman; and nobody said any evil of him, in spite of the fact that he was a comparatively new man. Respectable clothes, well-kept person, untanned skin; these gave him the appearance of being strangely out of place when seen among the brigandish citizens of the classic town of Way Back.

It is true that he had a foreman for his mine, who claimed a good record, and was known to be dizzy on the shoot, behind whom was a gang both rough and tough. But, however much their moral influence, they had never actually been called on to interfere; and perhaps they were of less importance than one on the outside would guess. So far, at least, no one had ever thrown any doubts upon the quality of Sidney's "sand."

There was one other reason why Sidney Campton should be looked at with some reverence if not respect. He was the brother of Belle Campton; and Belle Campton was a young lady possessed of the spirit and good looks that were better than coin at Way Back. While she did not have any intimate friends she had such a cordial way about her that no one accused her of being proud or exclusive, though there was no one else there quite so particular about making acquaintances. She had some excuse for not being seen abroad so often, since she was her brother's housekeeper, and looked after the physical comfort of him and Uriah.

As for the latter, there was not much known about him, except that he was Sidney Campton's man of all work, who attended strictly to business, and for the rest left the balance of the world alone. He had been an inmate of the little stone house, just out at the edge of town, for some months, and had shown no signs of setting the nearest river on fire by his brilliancy.

Of course, in some months at Way Back a man could hardly expect to go among its average citizens without meeting some sort of adventures. Uriah's were not of the sort to impress themselves strongly on the populace. He had been shot at two or three times accidentally or otherwise, had been found occasionally in the heart of a skirmish at fisticuffs; was dug out unwounded, from a cave-in; but Sidney seemed the only one who recognized the remarkable luck that protected him in all these places, when other and better men were killed. He watched the young man with amazed curiosity, and had arrived at the frame of mind concerning him indicated by the conversation just detailed.

Miss Belle did not usually take much stock in fellows of his stamp, and was not particularly interested in him; but his general appearance, as a dependent of the Campton household, shocked her taste when she did notice him; and she suggested either some changes, or dispensing with him altogether.

The result was—neither.

Sidney Campton laughed, and said that Uriah was good medicine just as he was, and that to change his coat might change his luck. When the innocent darling stood behind his chair in the thick of the heaviest game of draw of the season his luck changed to the good, right away, and saved a little fortune. He engaged Uriah on the spot, and intended to keep him as long as he would stay content with his work and wages.

Still, Uriah was not an elegant object to contemplate. He was clad in a suit of Kentucky jeans that fitted as though it had grown on him, except a void of about six inches around the ankles, where a pair of very dirty cotton stockings bridged the chasm between the pantaloons and the cowhide shoes that were a mile too big. His flaxen hair was worn long and plastered behind his ears, and the already wonderful length of his thin face was made almost preternatural by the long goatee that adorned his chin, while his big, fishy blue eyes never seemed to see anything nearer than a mile away. He was not much given to conversation, and stuttered when he talked.

Where Uriah came from was uncertain. He gave very indefinite answers when questioned on the subject, the substance of them being that he was from back East. The supposition was that he once lived on a farm somewhere up in New England, but in what State or section Campton had not been able to find out. That, however, was of little importance, so long as New England shrewdness, or a heavy run of good luck, brought the factotum through all right in the undertakings placed on his shoulders.

These, so far, had not been particularly important; but this trip to Coronado was of a different nature from anything he had yet been intrusted with, and Campton's judgment was either very good or very bad when he started him off in such a haphazard way; but Uriah, with the usual blundering haste that characterized his operations, climbed into the stage, that passed through exactly on time, and set out on his journey.

He was not the only passenger; and at Hard Luck several more got on, so that there was quite a stage full; and of rather sociable people, too, though the flaxen-haired youth seemed to be scarcely noticed, as he sat in silence, with his hands folded in front of him, and his big blue eyes staring straight forward.

The journey was long and tiresome, but it finally came to an end, and Uriah found himself at Coronado, looking neither the worse nor the better for his long ride. He went at once to the dinner-table, and afterward washed the sleep and dust out of his eyes and strolled around town, inquiring the price of things so persistently that several of the business men began to think they had got hold of a prospective storekeeper, who had come down to the nearest railroad point to lay in a stock of goods, and would have been willing to pay him attention accordingly, if he had shown a disposition to accept. He did not seem inclined to dissipate, shook his head at all invitations, and stuttered out a refusal.

There was a day to spare, according to Sidney Campton's instructions, but when the train

came in Uriah stopped incidentally as he was passing the station, and his great goggle eyes roved up and down the platform until he was satisfied that there were no two ladies inquiring the road to Way Back. Then he moved on. After supper he gazed reflectively up and down the street, and then turned around, re-entered the hotel and sought his bed. That he got there, no one could have doubted who took the trouble to listen. In a short time his snoring could be heard all over the house.

The following afternoon he was again incidentally at the station, and saw the two young ladies alight.

As they looked around in an inquiring way, it was not hard to guess that they were the travelers for Way Back. Even Uriah, had he been dumber than he looked, would not be likely to guess much less than that.

Having located them, he told the fact off on his fingers as the first point; and after scratching his head, rubbing his eyes, and otherwise brushing up his intellect, he found the second point, and looked around to see if there was any one with an eye on them, for either good or evil.

Specter Sam had slipped jauntily out of the Pullman and had gone airily about his business. It would have taken a wise head to suspect him.

Several men who had been lounging around, much after the manner of Uriah, had gone about their business, if they had any; and he felt no call to follow them.

But there was one person, a handsome though plainly-dressed young lady, who had already attracted his attention, and seemingly puzzled him greatly.

Uriah had been watching her, anyhow—when he saw that she was taking an interest in the arrivals, he became more vigilant; and when the three went away together, he shook his head and followed at a distance. Unfortunately he saw no way to overhear anything of their conversation; but he was not altogether without his resources. When he made his inquiries about the stage he found that three ladies were booked through to Way Back; and he immediately secured his own place and appeared to feel relieved. They were on the right track without any meddling on his part, which was a good augury for the total success of his mission.

This night, after supper, his bed did not have so many attractions. Instead of wooing slumber, he went off with a firmness that he did not often show, and this lasted at least until he had reached the White Star gambling saloon.

By that time something of this firmness had disappeared. He hesitated, turned away once or twice, as though he intended to depart without entering, and when he did pass through the doors, he sidled along the wall to a seat in a retired corner, where for some time he sat watching the proceedings.

The White Star was a place where, if one wanted a choice of amusements, he could find a pretty wide range to select from. Most anything went there, if it required skill to play it, and coin to back it up. The proprietor ran faro and sometimes Mexican monte, with no objections to short cards.

Although it was still early in the evening, the royal game had begun, and there was Mexican monte, *rouge et noir*, and half a dozen games of draw, while around the bar at the further end of the building, stood a crowd of the thirsty ones, who were drinking according to their means or their opportunity.

It was a room of good size, and though not very stylish, was fitted up well for the purposes for which it was used. At the end where Uriah had taken his seat, were two or three little stalls, each just about large enough to seat four men around a narrow board table covered with common oil-cloth. The partitions of these pens ran up some seven feet, and as there was a little door in front, that could be secured by a bolt, they were quite private, and were in some demand. There were men who did not care about all Coronado looking over their backs when they were playing for keeps.

The partitions were thin, though carefully put up. It would have been hard to see into the rooms; if their occupants did not want their conversation overheard, it was understood that they could talk in a low tone.

Sometimes this was done, and sometimes not. The five men who were crowded into one of them probably thought they were doing so—certainly they were not aware that Uriah, sitting crowded up after the most unobtrusive-looking style, with his eyes eagerly exploring the vista of the long room before him, was almost at their elbows, and could, if he chose, overhear almost every word that was said.

He neither started nor looked conscious when the conference ended as detailed in the previous chapter, but sat there unmoved and unmoving, while the five filed out and moved away toward the other end of the hall.

It was a long room—as has been stated—the five had gone some distance before Durango Dave suddenly halted, seizing Rube by the arm while he pointed at a large looking-glass.

"Curse him! The infernal meddler has heard

every word, keep an eye on him. Before we leave the Star he must go over the range."

Rube, looking up into the glass, saw the limpsy figure of Uriah, whose goggle eyes still roved around the hall.

CHAPTER IV.

MILLIE VANDELEUR'S COOL PLAY.

"By heavens!" said Rube, in the same intense undertone, "it's that fool of Campton's, from 'Way Back.' What's he doing here?"

"Catchin' on to our game, of course. What he don't know ain't worth knowing, and his boss is a bad man to have posted against us if he chooses to come in. Curse him! Sid Campton's a man that don't say much—butter don't melt in his mouth if you believe his looks—but I'll bet high that when he holds a full hand he knows what to do with it. But he couldn't know anything about our game, and maybe the billy-doodle won't have sense enough to put two and two together. He has the points—if he knows what they mean; and if it was all my say I'd plant him to make sure. I'll plant him right now. If it's to be done at all we don't want to let him carry the news to Way Back."

"Plant him, then. Maybe it won't be so safe to try it on here, when Daisy Dan could do it along the road without any trouble; but there's the risk of his leaking before he starts, or Sid Campton turning up and getting the whole give-away. It's an awkward job, but it's got to be done. Eh? Curses on it! Just when a fellow turns over a new leaf and makes up his mind to reform! Did you ever see such luck?"

"Tough it is; but how you going to get at him—where's the best place to finish it up? A trick of that kind I'd always sooner work with a crowd looking on to see fair play. It saves afterclaps."

"Correct you are, again. Maybe it won't be so hard if he stays stuck up there. He must be just dying to be plugged or he wouldn't prop himself for such a good mark. If we can't do better we'll go down there and start a racket. You pull your knife on me, and I'll draw and plug—him."

"And afterward? If I don't lift the hair of a man that takes a shot at me the boys will all think I've lost my sand, and I'll have to kill a dozen before they understand there has been a mistake."

"Don't be so bashful. I'll fix that. It's the only way to work the raffle. He won't fight, you see, and you'll have to. They won't howl if a man makes a misshot; but there would be merry Hades if we stepped hard on the toes of the flat from Way Back."

"You're talking sense with a flat foot, and yet—I'm not sure how it will work. The signs ain't right for a job of that kind, and I had a bad dream the first night I struck the town. I'll take four to one that something happens to somebody. There's no luck bucking against a man without brains. Still—let her went! It all goes, and you'll find me right behind you."

Durango Dave looked down moodily as he spoke. It was clear that he had some superstitious repugnance to the proposed deed. Certainly it was not from any conscientious scruples since, with him, to remove an obstacle in the way, even though it was a human life, was only a matter of course. But, as he put it, Uriah was destined to prove "bad medicine" for him, and if there had been any other way to do he would have avoided the necessity of seeing his partner draw irons on him. Just at that time he would have rather met half a dozen better men all bound for slaughter, than to have meddled with the one goggle-eyed tenderfoot in Kentucky jeans. Yet—Dave would not allow his superstitions to interfere with business, and he followed Rube down the hall with the intention of doing his best to remove the dangerous Uriah before he had opportunity to do damage with the knowledge he had obtained.

They had been speaking low, and they thought they had not been overheard; but again they were mistaken. There was a beardless listener, who looked like a lad of fourteen or fifteen, whose eyes twinkled, and whose little hand went toward the skirts of the blouse that might conceal the weapons that such a movement generally told were somewhere within reach.

As the two moved on the lad moved as silently in their wake—a smile on his handsome face as the desperadoes began to talk earnestly, and put on the looks of men who were laboring under some excitement.

"Very neatly worked. In five minutes more the flat from Way Back would be the prettiest kind of a corpse if your humble servant wasn't here to take a hand in. Not such a bad stroke for me, if it don't take too much shooting to get them switched off of the track."

Uriah, sitting by himself in the corner, offered a very fair mark; and it seemed a little strange that he had not attracted attention before this. In such a promiscuous crowd as was gathered at the White Star a ruffian or two can generally be found, who cannot resist the opportunity to badger an innocent, who looks as though the operation would furnish more fun than danger.

Something of the kind may have suggested

itself to him, as he slowly arose, and began to walk forward with a hesitating step. Unfortunately, as it seemed, he chose a line that took him directly toward Revolver Rube and his pard. The floor was comparatively open in that direction; but, if it offered such a chance for a collision, it also left an unobstructed line for Rube to carry out his programme. At that distance there was no danger that he would miss his mark.

Uriah's eyes were fixed on the bar; his mouth worked nervously, as though he was anxious for fluid refreshment, yet not altogether sure that it was safe for him to appear so openly at the front. When he had traversed half the distance he halted suddenly, his head bent forward, his hands hidden in his pantaloons pockets, a look of dismay on his face.

Two men had suddenly burst into a fury.

The cause was not so apparent, but doubtless the excited conversation they had been carrying on in an attempted undertone would have explained it. There were a dozen or so words of wrath on either side, and then they fell apart a pace or two further: Durango Dave flashed forth a knife and crouched as if for a spring; while Revolver Rube's hand swung around to the weapon at his hip. It was all going like clockwork, and a few seconds would have finished the game.

But, just then, when the eyes of every one near turned to them, and the crisis appeared to be at hand, there was a new element introduced.

"Hold on there, just one moment, pards! You hear me?"

The listener had sprung between the two with outstretched arms, and in either hand he held a cocked derringer, the muzzle of which almost touched a face.

"You, Revolver Rube, listen to me warble; and you, Durango Dave, go slow with that knife till I'm done my shout. I'm not earring a continental which of you gets killed; but you're both too mad just now to do straight work. Cool off a little, and there'll be twice the chance to wing the right man.

"And that's what bothers me.

"You, Dave, can't go very far wrong; but s'pose Rube shoots wild? You listen to me, Rube, and then go on with your cattle-killing! If you get away with Dave, all right! But I'm standing here, and I swear, if you hit anybody else, or get away with that fool from Way Back, I'll have you dead before he hits the floor! I mean business, chuck-up, and I'll keep you both covered. Now, drive on!"

At the sudden interruption the belligerents fell back a pace each, and there was a wicked glitter in the eyes of Durango Dave, that seldom came there save when he meant something like murder.

A warning gesture from Rube restrained him.

It was just a slight motion of the left hand, but Dave saw it, and waited. It might be that this fresh young lad was one of those it would be more than unsafe to drop on sight; and Rube was running things, anyhow.

The face of the man of the revolver changed to a sickly white, yet otherwise he stood unmoved, while he listened to the threatening address.

It was clear that this lad understood the game that had been set up; and that he intended to balk it. After that warning, openly given, and plainly heard by nearly every man in the saloon, it would not be healthy for anything to happen to Uriah, unless they were willing to risk having to fight the town. There was no doubt but what the lad meant just what he said, and the most probable reason was, that having overheard the scheme he interfered because he had an interest in either Uriah or the two young ladies. If the latter, then the chances were that the unlucky conversation had given away their purposes even more completely than they had feared, still, something had to be done—and it was left to Revolver Rube to decide what it was to be.

He did not hesitate. A man he might have shot—probably would—but a boy! He could afford to let him go, and treat the insinuation as a joke.

"I hear you, little one, and I guess maybe you've done more good than you counted on. I don't want to plug Dave, here; and if he'll listen to reason, perhaps he won't be so anxious to knife me. But all the same, you are crowing entirely too loud for a spring chicken that hardly has the signs of his own heels, let alone biting at a man to coax him to try the gaffs. A man with a record can afford to laugh at it; but if you keep on at such games there'll be a man some day that will go through you just too quick for any fun."

"That's all right, Reuben, if you think so; I'm running the chances. Call it square, and I'll pocket my shooters. I'm not trying to get into a row myself, and I was just laying it down straight what would happen if those that were made any mistakes. It was better all round to do it now than wait till you had put somebody's chunk out, and then have a Lynch court and a hanging about the time it adjourned. Look a little out, and see that good

advice and sound doctrine are not thrown away on you."

Revolver Rube turned to the crowd.

"Gentlemen, as I said before, I am not spoiling for a fight. I've no quarrel with any one but Dave here, and not much with him. I don't take water for any man, or any ten men, but you can see I can't take up a racket with a boy like this. If there is any one who has anything to say, now is the time to talk it. I'll let it go as part of the circus and free show we've just been having. But after this, when you talk, you want to keep cool and see that neither of us is around before you mention this little piece of work. If not, somebody drops, and Revolver Rube is the boy that is barking. How is it? Are you all done? And if you're done you want to stay done—and don't you forget it. How is it, Dave?"

"I'm feeling your way prezactly. Two old pards are blame fools to fall out about such a little matter, and the boy was just right. If he hadn't talked then we couldn't have heard him now, and that's what's the matter. Shake, old pard. What will you drink?"

Durango Dave understood his cue at once. The scowl had left his face, and his hand was extended toward Revolver Rube, while he glanced at the lad with a smile and a nod.

"Glad to hear you talking sense; and the man in the crowd that says it ain't can just settle with me. But it would have raised merry Hades if you'd dropped an outsider. Coronado don't like to lose a citizen, and it has a mortgage on the strangers inside the gates as long as they have a dime to bless themselves with. Good-by, my friends, if the frolic is over. I hardly had time to stay as long as I did, but I couldn't leave until things were straight. If there's any more trouble, I'll hear of it sure, and I'll see you all later."

His derringers were in his pockets, and so were his hands. He strutted away like a victorious game-cock, and without the least show of concern, though he knew, if no one else did, that he had made two deadly enemies, and that his chances of hearing from them soon were very good. They looked after him in a cool, meditative way that presaged evil.

"Two of 'em now," whispered Dave, as they ranged themselves alongside of the bar. "He's a cool young daisy, and it strikes me that it's about time his toes turned up. Hades! He's a side-pard of the Flat from Way Back. Both of them must go!"

"Right you are; and it's all the better. If the youngster caps for him he won't be apt to tell any one else. So he's killed at the right time there's not much danger of the news spreading."

While they talked low at one end of the bar, the youngster talked slow with Uriah at the other—for the Fool from Way Back had finally slouched forward into position, without seeming to understand what the racket was about, at which he had stared in his usual way.

"Say, pard, I'm dry as a fish, and was just going to call them up; but I don't like to guzzle alone. What will you have?"

"Wh-wh-whisky!"

Uriah showed signs of animation, cut short his stammering, and blew out the word with explosive force. He could not have made a more cordial response, and he proceeded to demonstrate his earnestness by pouring out a tumblerful of the liquid lightning kept on hand at the White Star.

He wasted no time in remarks, but just giving a roll of his eyes and a nod of his head, threw it down, smacked his lips, gave another nod, and then turned as though he considered the performance over.

The lad smiled. Perhaps it was provoking as well as amusing, but then there was a consoling side to the performance. If Uriah showed little gratitude and no desire to extend the circle of his acquaintance, he evinced a disposition to get out of the range of the optics of Revolver Rube and his pard; and that was what the youth would have suggested. He moved forward as Uriah moved away. Without any agreement they walked out of the White Star together.

The action had its danger, yet neither showed that he cared for it. As they went out Revolver Rube measured the distance mentally. If there had been nothing on hand he might have done more, but there were risks connected with it. He preferred to bide his time.

"And now, sport," said the lad, clapping his hand on Uriah's shoulder, when they had passed out of sight of those in the saloon, "you were in a heap of danger, and if I hadn't dropped to their game you would have been dead meat before this. They'll lay for both of us now, but that's all right. We can stand them off. At least, I'm willing to run my chances; and I'll guarantee to look after yours if you play me fair, and open up down to bed-rock. You sabbe?"

"W-w-w-what y-y-you talkin' 'bout?"

"You, my friend. You heard what these men had to say when you were propped up there alongside of that little private room over yonder. You know what their game is; and the man that knows that dies, if they can get around to it. I've saved you once just as Re-

volver Rube was pulling on you, and I'll have another chance before we get through. If you want to have me chip give me the whole truth now. What's their game?"

"I d-d-d-dunno what you mean. I d-d-didn't h-h-h-hear nothin', an' I w-w-wasn't settin' thar more ner a minnit 'f-f-f-ore they come out. Y-y-you m-m-must be foolin'."

"A very serious kind of fooling you'll find it. If you're telling the truth you're the most unlucky fellow I know of; and if you're telling a lie, it's a lie that will cost you your life. Last chance—what were those boys talking about? I don't mind telling you that I'm a detective. Your safety lies in getting your secret into the hands of some one else."

"F-f-f you was ter t-t-talk till the Judgment Day, I k-k-k-couldn't tell yer any more. I dunno w'ot they said, an' I d-d-d-d-don't want. G-g-g-go an' a-a-a-ax 'em, b-b-but don't b-b-bother me. I-I-I-I'm g-g-goin' ter bed."

"Go, then!" exclaimed the other, in a tone of deep disgust. "But look out for Revolver Rube and his pards. They'll have you for a corpse before you leave town if you don't keep both eyes wide open."

In some disgust the detective turned away, while Uriah plodded on to his stopping-place, his face and actions showing no more concern about the late affair at the White Star than if he had not been an interested party.

CHAPTER V.

REVOLVER RUBE'S TENDERFOOT.

"WHO is that young rooster?" asked Revolver Rube of the barkeeper officiating at his end. "He's a fly kid, and no mistake. He got the drop on us old hands like a little major. It's tough to take water; but when there ain't too much benzine on board, and a man can see that it fits his hand, he's willing once in a while to cave. I wouldn't have plugged Dave here, for a fortune, and I guess he's just as well satisfied he didn't let daylight into me."

"You bet I am, pard. It was all a mistake. It kinder r'iled me afore I thought who was saying it."

"You see," continued Rube, "he's a leetle tetchy about some things. But the youngster gave us time to think who was talking, and a fellow can't be blamed for taking good advice from a little kid like that. Does he belong about here?"

"Don't know much about him," responded the tumbler-juggler. "He's been in here before, but I guess he hangs out around the Comet. He's little, but he's tough. A man don't want to smack him; and I don't know of any kid around here that I'd like to back to do the job and get away. And I haven't seen much of him, either."

"Funny I never stumbled across him before. He knew me, straight along, and maybe I've seen him without knowing it. Did you drop on to his name yet?"

"Johnny Lynch, they call him; and he generally answers, so they can't be so very far wrong. I guess, maybe, he had some friend behind him when he was laying down the law, or he wouldn't have been quite so brash."

"The boy's all right, but if you hear any of those friends shooting off their lip just send them around where I live. But what's he got with that galoot he has in tow?"

"Can't prove it by me. Never saw him before. He don't belong around here. They're going off together, and may be pards. You got anything in for tow-head?"

"Never saw him before, either; but some one said he was from Way Back. He'd better stay there."

Uriah and his newly-found friend were just leaving. It was only a casual glance that Rube threw after them; but by chance the female detective caught it; and though expecting it before, from that moment knew that they were to be followed. While engaged in the unsuccessful attempt to bribe Uriah she kept her eyes about her, and after leaving for the night, proceeded with caution.

The bartender at the White Star had not gone so far from the truth when he mentioned the Comet as her headquarters, though he spoke almost at random. Toward the Comet she turned her steps, and reached the place without molestation. When she entered Rube was engaged in a game of draw, while Durango Dave looked over his shoulder.

Though Revolver Rube and his pard left the White Star but a minute or so after the two, they failed to get on their track; since they turned to the left instead of the right, and proceeded immediately to the Comet. On the way Durango Dave had a chance to question his pard.

"Pears ter me, Rube, yer going a heap slow. I've known the time when two men wouldn't have walked off with a load like that. I knowed that the flat would be bad medicine fer us, but I thought by this time we'd either be bucking against the rest of Coronado, or Coronado would be taking water. There ain't much time to fatten 'em up fer slaughter; and Lucifer would have had both of 'em laid out, and half the town on cooling boards, by this time. It's a heap bad pity that he was in such an infernal hurry get-

ting away with Sam, and fur one it strikes me it wouldn't be a bad idea to try and hunt him up and ask for orders."

"Hunt fire and brimstone! If the old boss knew how we had botched the job he'd be hunting us—with a six in each hand. I've no use fer Lucifer Lightning till I've got a brace of scalps to show him; and if you remember as much about the old man as you ought to, you'll say you haven't either."

"There's a heap in that, too. It's no odds to him if we go out of the damp right now. It leaves just so much bigger divvy fer the rest of 'em. But if you'd kept your hands down, I'd have cleaned up the youngster at a venture. What in blazes made you get so white about the gills when you looked him in the face? It beat me!"

"Maybe I'm a fool, and maybe I've lost my sand; but fer just about five minutes I had an idea we were both elected. Johnny Lynch don't bluff so heavy without a side-pard holding a cold deck all ready to fill his hand from, and the first letter of that pard's name is Pinnacle Pete!"

"Whew!"

Durango Dave recognized that name at least, and uttered a prolonged whistle.

"But where was Pete when the bluffing was going on? He don't generally stand back and let his pard do all the chin-chin. And who was the whiffet, anyhow? A plucky little bantam, as I could see by his eye; yet, all the same, I could have dropped and fired before he got his hammers back."

"The hammers would have come back when he crooked his fingers. The youngster had self-cockers; and Pete was somewhere in the crowd, with both hands in his side-pockets. He's a bad man to have trouble with when you can see him; but if he took a square shot at you from behind, it would be certain death. The youngster is a boy with a craw full of sand, and both hands full of tools. But he don't happen to be a boy at all, but the nerviest little woman that ever handled a six or sent lead home plumb-center! Maybe you've heard of her. She's a female sleuth, that has run in more than one of the boys that it paid to trail down, and her right name—or the name she goes by when she's at home—is Millie Vandeleur. I tell you, we want to pitch it a little careful. The town would string us up, sure, for killing a woman—and we've got three bad cases on our hands instead of one."

"And the rest of the boys have sloped and left the whole job to us?"

"That's the size of it. Now you know what's what, you can see into the game. Of course, if we can get a chance to down 'em here we'll do it; but if we haven't a good show, we'll have to follow 'em out and down 'em on the road. Come on! We'll see what's going on at the Comet. If I can find my tenderfoot I'll make it pay, if I can crowd the game along before the night gets old."

They had so far seen nothing of their quarry, and with the most innocent air in the world, they pushed through the door of the saloon.

Durango Dave might have asked a few questions in regard to matters as his partner saw them, but he followed Rube's lead without hesitation. They had worked together many a time in the past, and Rube had never been known to go very far wrong in his actions, or fail to look after his partners.

As they stood at the bar they were carefully examining the crowd; but could see nothing of Uriah, or the supposititious Johnny Lynch.

"There's my man," whispered Rube, as they set their glasses down.

"You look out, and I'll slaughter the innocent if he is willing to come my way again."

He gave an almost imperceptible nod at a man who was seated at one of the tables looking impatiently in their direction.

"He's got to come for me if he wants to see me."

The stranger evidently was interested in Revolver Rube, for when he saw him throw himself into a lounging position, with no appearance of having any desire to engage in a game, he apparently decided that he would have to push things himself.

First he beckoned; but, as he did not catch the eye of either man, he rose from his seat and hastily came over.

"I've been lookin' fur yer all evenin'," he grumbled. "Yer fifty good dollars ahead ov ther game, an' yer said, when yer jumped it, thet you'd give me a chance ter git even. You ain't a-hurryin', nohow. Money's waitin' on yer ter say yer can't do it no more."

"Don't be in such a hurry, my friend. The longer you put the game off, the longer you'll stay rich. I've got other things to look after that I can't leave for your little tin-pot games at the Comet. I'm here now, though, and if you want to blow in the balance of your pile I'm ready."

"Mebbe you won't want a wagon ter kerry away yer boodle this time. Hyar's yer chance ter try it on. I've hed chances ter wrestle at keards with half ther boys in Karrynader, but I war a-waitin' fur you, an' I'm a-comin' down on yer like a double-barr'l cyclone, an' clean yer

up, root an' branch. When Jehu Jones tackles a man at poke he hez ter wrestle fur his life with ther ole war-hoss or ther Allegennys, ther boss ov all outdoors, ther bad man from way up ther krick. He may git winged in ther send-off; but he cuts to ther rattles afore he gits through. You ole sinner! I bin waitin' fur you; an' I mean ter warp it to yer bad."

Revolver Rube had called this man a tender-foot and perhaps he was; but he had the slang of the slums pretty well at his finger-ends, and looked as though he might be a tough customer to crawl over, if he had the nerve to back up his blowing. There was a fair sprinkle of gray in his shaggy beard, his hair was thick and stubby, there was a weather-beaten look about his face, and his clothing was coarse and none too well kept. His hands were brown and deeply veined, and his walk, as he led the way in triumph was between a slouch and a swagger.

Rube had taken hold of him cautiously, while lounging around the Comet; but after an hour's experimenting left him with regret, Jehu had shown at least a hundred dollars more, and as Rube had decided that he had a percentage of two to one, even in a square game, he considered that he held a mortgage on that amount.

He knew very well that if Jehu, was what he seemed no amount of bluffing would shake him off until the game was played to the end; and as it was possible that there might be trouble before they got through he wanted to be able to disclaim any charge of having roped the man in at the start. Rube had a great respect for appearances when in a strange place; and Coronado was not exactly one of his stamping-grounds.

The two sat down to play, and the cards had been dealt and the game was going on by the time Johnny Lynch entered.

Revolver Rube saw the arrival at once, and by a slight nod indicated it to Durango Dave—who responded in the same way. After that he kept his attention centered on his game. There was money in that, and he left his partner to look out for the other side of the house.

At the beginning the play was not very rapid. Rube held no cards, and Jehu was cautious; yet by the time a couple of hands were played it was evident that the latter had whatever luck was going—and knew what to do with it. Rube was not going to have the walk-over he had before supper, though to do that was part of the plan that he had hastily sketched, to dispose of Lynch.

The lad seemed to be at home here.

He nodded to more than one of the loungers; and looked around him with the air of one who had slept under the tables. Durango Dave kept a stealthy eye on him as he moved around the saloon, and scowled as he saw him approach the table by which he was standing.

The lad may have caught the frown; but was by no means abashed.

"Got around here, have you, old sport? It's a good place to be, if you walk square on the line. Couldn't you have wriggled into the game with the stranger? There's fat pickin's there, and it's a shame for Rube to have all the gravy."

Dave responded, with a growl that had no particular meaning except bad humor. If he had been nearer he would have followed it up by smacking at the youngster's mouth.

"Yes, I see," continued Johnny, airily.

"Rube's a good man but selfish—most blamed selfish. He wants the whole loaf, and you can sit in this corner and chaw wind. He won't divvy worth a cent after it's over, and the best thing you can do is to sit down and play seven-up with me till he's done. I know the cards by name, and they say you're a hustler at that game. There would be big sport; and here's rocks to make it interesting."

A fierce light glittered in Durango Dave's eyes. Half a dozen had heard, and if evil for the little sport should happen to come of it there was fair evidence that it was none of his brewing.

Had he been alone he would have been down and at work in no time; but tacitly he had agreed to follow the lead of another man, and toward him he looked, half hoping that Rube had not heard the challenge.

But though it was interfering with his game the man of the revolvers was keeping an eye on Johnny Lynch, and again he gave an almost unperceptible sign, and then went on with his deal.

It was not in flesh and blood to allow the banter to pass without some answer. From Rube, Durango Dave looked back to the youngster, letting his eyes run over his not very stalwart proportions.

"Kid, you're entirely too fresh. I haven't any business with you; but if you'll get your trainer to talk I'll give him such an interview as he'll remember. If he don't want to say anything you'd better dry up. As a stranger here I don't want to make hard feeling, spanking somebody's youngest darling; but you'll rustle around till you strike a boy that will sit down on you."

"Just shows where you're away off. I'm not

talking; it's my money that wants to talk for me. If you can't see it, all right. I'll wait till I strike a man with more sand in his craw, or more dust in his buckskin. I'm little, as you observe, but I guess you know what you're doing when you clap on the brakes. I'm mighty tough."

The lad folded his arms, with an impudent leer on his face, and moved a little nearer to Jehu, who just at that moment raked in a good-sized pot. Rube could not watch both games; and he had let his run go, though a minute later he was cursing himself for his folly, since a little nerve backed by coin must have brought the stakes his way to the first betting hand he had held in the second sitting.

Fortune don't stand that kind of treatment, either. For the next few hands the cards ran more contrary than ever. Jehu was already about square on the game and the tide just beginning to come in. It began to be time to aid fortune a little.

Rube would have sooner won on a square game, if there had been any chance to do so in a reasonable time. But he was afraid to let this little side game of his interfere too much with Captain Lucifer's business, and he believed it was advisable to run the risks. For several hands he had been holding out, and had three queens under his knee.

Johnny Lynch had moved away after watching keenly for some time, and there seemed no outsider who would be likely to detect him.

As he looked at his cards on the deal, Jehu's eyes glittered, and Rube, covertly watching him, knew that he had a good hand, even without the evidence in his subsequent discard.

Rube glanced at his own.

He held an ace, king, queen, and two small cards of no known value at poker.

"I'll take three," he said, as he carelessly pushed the deck head nearer to Jehu, and at the same time threw into the middle his discard.

The three queens, lately under his knee, came back to him from the top of the deck, and he knew that he held an invincible hand, since straight flushes had not been ruled into the game. Jones only took one card, so that the chances were that he held four of a kind.

At any rate the bets advanced briskly, until there was something like four hundred on the table.

Then, suddenly, Jehu called; and Revolver Rube coldly strung his five cards in front of him, and turned one eye toward the stakes.

"I see 'em," said Jehu, holding his cards well bunched together, and as little expression on his face as if it had been carved out of a red-wood knot.

"They're most durned purty-lookin' she-males; but whar did yer git three ov 'em? I'll swar yer didn't hev 'em on a squar' show, an' I wa'n't observin' prezactly how you wrung 'em in."

Rube kept cool as an icicle. He did not altogether care to have the question heard by the room at large.

"You gave 'em to me, old man, and there they are. Are they good? That's what I'm asking. Show up or shut up."

"It is kinder cur'us like, fur I kin swar thet jest after I begun ter deal ther three queens war under yer knee; an' what I want ter know is, how yer raised 'em. Yer diskeard are all right, an' yer ain't got no more about yer."

"And you mean to say I am cheating?"

Rube was deadly cool. There was four hundred at stake, and his reputation besides.

"That's what they call it," yelled Jehu.

Then he seemed quickened by a galvanic shock. One arm swept around the stakes, drawing them over to his side of the table, while with the other hand he shook out a deringer, that stared Revolver Rube full in the face.

And, at the very same moment, Durango Dave heard the harsh click of a revolver just at his back, and the cheerful voice of Johnny Lynch.

"Really now, David. Slow and sure's the word. Don't think of chipping. It's a single-handed game they're playing, and if you're dying for slaughter, let's you and me go off somewhere in a corner and have our own little game alone."

CHAPTER VI.

PINNACLE PETE, THE MASQUERADER.

THE warning was just in time, for Durango Dave was already crouching for a spring. He never left his pard in any emergency; and this was a case in which he would, anyhow, be justified in interfering. To bring a charge of cheating, without any evidence to back it up, meant, at any time, war to the death; but to catch the drop in such a way looked very much like premeditated murder.

If it had not been for the caution Rube had given him, Dave would probably have made his spring anyhow; but, though Coronado was a tough town, it was not beyond the pale of lawful courts and moderately certain justice. When officers spoke then it meant something, and Dave had an idea that a detective's caution in such a case meant just what he said.

Accordingly he checked his movements; but he never took his eyes off the two as he growled:

"That's all right, but if he drops my pard I'll kill him, and don't you forget it. You can shoot now, if you want to; but there's enough in the room to see just how the land lays. If you kill me before another gun is fired your sex won't save you. They'll swing you and that old fraud there as high as Haman."

"That's all right, little one, that's all right! Just so you take time to think. Revolver Rube is able to take care of himself, and I reckon Jehu knows what to say. Just you listen to 'em both talk, and I won't hurt you."

"You infernal, little, dried-up, small end of nothing! You couldn't hurt the hind half of a dead mosquito. You're giving us all wind to-night, and think your pard will get in the fine work. You look out that we don't get away with you both before the night's over. Something more than you holds my hands tied. As soon as they get loose I'll be going to even up; and I'll begin on you, curse you."

"Thanks for the warning; but I understood all that before. Your pard's saying something. Don't you want to listen to him shout?"

Revolver Rube was so quick on the trigger that they called him in every camp he entered after his favorite weapon.

Unfortunately for him he was not on the shoot this evening, unless it was in the last emergency, and so instead of having his hand on his pistol, with the hammer back, when Jehu began to talk, he was simply staring at him in wrath.

Then the derringer was shoved into his face, and the drop was on him. He knew when a man's eyes said shoot, and he was sure a motion meant death. There was no chance left him except to talk.

"Old man, you're 'way off your base, and if you know what's good for you you'll pull in that piece of iron, shove that coin back again to the middle, pass the cards this way, and either jump the racket or go on with the game. Meantime, as to what you said, if you say it over again, I'll answer that you're a double-barreled liar from the city of Liarsville, and if you give me half a show I'll prove it with cards, knife, pistol, or any other way that a gentleman can prove a thing is a lie that only rests on another man's say-so."

"Oh, yes, you've got nerve—nerve enough ter tell a lie an' then swar to it; or shoot when yer know yer' got ther dead medicine. But you ain't got ther nerve ter kick ag'in' a dead sure thing, when there's cold lead comin' plum' center ahind it. I said ther war some kind ov skull-duggery 'bout ther way you got three ov them queens, an' I'm a-stickin' to it. An' I ain't givin' away any ov my chances, ner hev any man tellin' me I'm a liar. That's flat-footed an' strong. You kin jest spend a minnit er so figgerin' up wha' yer goin' ter do 'bout it."

"I'll tell you what I'm going to do about it; I'm going to hold my hands up and walk right out of the Comet. When such things go on then it's dead sure that I won't have a fair show here. But the next time I meet you I'll shoot you. You can spend the interval saying your prayers and getting ready for glory. If that platform don't suit you, shoot quick, before you lose your sand altogether, and run away from a man who is a man all over, and who can take a dozen such men as you are when he starts with an even chance."

"Your even chance means two er three shots afore ther other chap knows you're after him. I'm good ernuf fur any man I ketch cheatin' me—an' I ketched you. This hyar derringer sez I'm tellin' ther truth. Now, I'm willin' ter fix this right here, an' any way yer want it. But ef it goes over ter ther next time, yer want ter walk mighty keerful. I'll shoot ter kill from ther fu'st deal."

"If you're man enough, as you say, I would sooner finish now. Put that shooter back where it came from, and then pull at the word 'go.' The man that walks away takes the pot with him."

It was a desperate offer—to fight at signal across the table, and it meant death to one of them, but there was no hesitation about Jehu. The readiness with which he accepted, confirmed Rube's suspicion that he was a bad man—worse than his looks—who had been playing for more than coin; and the hasty side glance that showed how Durango Dave had been corralled, seemed to point him out for a certainty as a partner of the lady detective.

"All-right, an' be hanged to yer! Hyar, you, Oregon! Give us ther word jest ez we sit hyar—one, two, three, go! I'll put my popper back, an' you down any one that tries ter pull afore ther word go. Ready I be."

"Oregon" was a tall, raw-boned, tough-looking man, with a broad scar on his face, and two six-shooters at his waist, who was a stranger to every man in the room. He had been laying around town, without doing much of anything but spread his own glory, and shout his own name.

He accepted the position without a bit of bashfulness.

"That's my name—Oregon are—an' that's jest my buzzum vanity. I'm an ole hoss ter

give ther word, an' you don't want ter furgit it. Fu'st, I kiver you."

He whipped out one revolver after the other.

"And now, I kiver you!"

He stood some three yards away, and covered them both with experienced ease.

"Now she are comin' an' you want ter moove 'cordin' ter Gunter. Ready! One! Two!—Three! Go!"

He hesitated a moment on the three, and then shouted the last word so that it rung through the house.

So far the conditions of the impromptu duel had been fairly complied with. Neither man made a movement until the signal; then Revolver Rube's hand flew back as if worked by a strong spring. He had his revolver out and rising before Jehu made a move.

"He's got him!" exclaimed Durango Dave, in his excitement forgetting the man at his elbow; and three-fourths of the spectators joined him in his belief. If there had been time for betting the current odds would have been five to one on Revolver Rube—and few takers.

But, Jehu had his own methods; and know exactly what he was about. He moved like a catamount, and had the strength of a tiger. Instead of leaning back he flung himself forward, his right hand seizing Rube's shoulder before it could swing away, his left hand catching Rube's revolver wrist as it rose.

For an instant there was a scuffling sound, like when a terrier worries a rat; then came the report of a pistol, followed by a crack as Jehu twisted the revolver out of Rube's fingers, and then threw him back with a broken arm.

"Not that hand, ole hoss—take t'other hand; an' ef yer tries it I'll plug that, sure. I didn't want ter kill yer, arter all; so I jest giv' yer a leetle warnin' not ter fool 'round ther big cyclone ov ther Allegennies tell yer gits a few more prongs on yer horns. Jest say ther word now. Hev I won ther pot fair, or must I hev cold meat fur breakfast?"

It was a tremendous fall that Revolver Rube received, and he struck the floor as heavily as though he had tumbled off of the house.

Nevertheless his wits were about him—or perhaps, rather, the dead game of a real bad man who holds on as long as there is a chance and a living inch. He tried to make a motion with his broken arm. Then, as he realized that to be useless, he raised to a sitting posture, his left hand darting around to his hip.

But he looked up, too—and found himself staring into the muzzle of Jehu's weapon. He might be flaming with wrath; but he could tell when the drop was on him, and what the chances were that the holder would work it for what it would bring.

"Curses on you! I thought this was to be a game of lead and powder. You've doctored my arm with your foul trick, and I'm not kicking where I have no show for my white alley. I pass out unless you try to make me eat too much dirt. Four queens ain't good against the hand that you're holding. If you want it said any better than that you hire a man. I don't know how."

"That's good ernuf fur you. It takes more nerve ter hold ther edge that way then ter shut yer eyes, go it blind, an' then lose ther pot sure. Yer' a better man than they said an' I'm glad I found yer. I'm on'y lookin' fur chiefs. Are yer talkin' fur self an' pard; er d'yer want me ter look arter him? I see, he's beginnin' ter wiggle, an' ef he gits real rammin' jammin' feroxious, mebbe ther boy can't hold him."

"This ain't Durango Dave's put; and he'd only want too bad to be saving you up fer the time when you settle with me. Take the cake, stranger, you win it."

He waved his uninjured arm as he spoke.

Perhaps it was only the gesture of an elocutionist who puts in such things in season and out of season.

More likely it was a signal to Dave.

The latter had his hands even fuller than it looked. The "boy" had kept persistently at his back; and had all the chances. He had to be disposed of before anything could be done for Rube. There was no longer a doubt but that the two were working together. On the bare chance that Johnny Lynch might be off of his guard Dave ran the risks, and wheeled suddenly. The boy was ready for him.

As Dave faced him he struck a straight blow, with the grace and skill of a polished boxer.

It did not look to be a hard hit, and it was done so quickly that even those near did not see exactly how it was given, so there was more than surprise when the burly man went howling down in a heap.

"Thet settles two ov 'em," remarked Jehu, not at all astonished. "The rest of the gang has got away, but I reckon we'll see them later on. Anybody got anything to say? Ef so now's the time ter say it, ez we got ter be movin'. No! Wal that's hearty. So-long, Rube. You'll hev ter talk fur both tell yer paid's jaw gits well. Jest now I reckon it's bu'sted wide open."

It would have been a little hard to tell how the sympathy of the crowd leaned. At first it was rather with the old man; but when the two pards were disposed of in such a cool, workman-

like manner, there was a strong suspicion that he was more than he seemed, and that perhaps sympathy ought to run the other way—especially when he just bluffed against the whole city, so to speak. If Jehu had remained a little longer, and traveled on that gait, he would have had his hands full as the local chiefs gathered in.

No one followed the two out, however; and they vanished unmolested.

"Better luck than I thought, little one," muttered Jehu, as they passed the door.

"For a minute or so I thought all Coronado was going to pile right in. We were betting high that none of their old side pards were about, and that Lucifer and his friends had left the town. Fact is, Rube is losing his sand; and Dave ain't worth much unless he sees a chance to put a knife in from behind. It's well enough to have them laying off for a while; but if it was only a game of my own that was to be played I'd have hardly gone to all that trouble. They will have to lay back for repairs, and then won't be worth much. Meanwhile, we'll take a flip at the balance till they get around again. I'm not done with them yet."

"If Uriah's ears had been as sound as they are long, he'd have heard the whole lay-out; but I pumped him dry and didn't get a bucketful of information for the risks I run of his dropping to the game—if, indeed, he did not."

"Let him go. What we can't guess at is hardly worth knowing, and we'll take them all into camp, straight as a string. It's getting late. Turn in now, and if anything important should develop I'll let you know. Otherwise, the game stands as we set it up, and play your cards accordingly."

It might have been worth their while to have kept an eye on the two men they had just put out of the game.

Rube, with a broken arm, and Dave with a cracked jaw, were still thinking machines that could be dangerous.

It took an hour to get out from under the surgeon's hands, and in such shape that Rube could do a little talking.

"It's tough, Dave, but if you can't grin you've got to bear it, anyhow. It's a mighty bad beginning; but I never knew the boss throw up a job he'd laid out. He ought to know the latest wrinkle, and know it quick."

Dave gave a growl like a sick tiger.

"I understand you, pard. You needn't try to talk. We won't have to carry the news. Dan the Daisy don't work the road to Way Back without having a lookout at Coronado. What I'm in a heap of trouble 'bout is how to find him. If he is fly to who we are, he ought to have turned up by this time; but maybe he's waiting for a chance. If he shows up we'll send him South a-whooping, to let them know that Sid Campton's man heard the whole racket, and Pinnacle Pete and his girl pard are on the war-path, and had better be headed off before they do more damage."

"All right, pards, I'll take that news ez fast ez hoss kin kerry. I bin hangin' 'round ter see who you are, an' I guess I got ther full heft ov it b'iled down. I won't take no more fur fear I'll lose it. Ther Daisies kin guess at ther rest. I'll tell Dan whar ter find yer, an' he kin send ef he wants furdur perticklers. Day-day! It's a long ride, but he pays big when yer bring him news."

In Coronado every wall seemed to have ears. They had been talking in an undertone, but what they said had been overheard—as it happened, by the right man. In a sharp whisper he sent back these words through the convenient crack at which he had been listening, and then, without ever having made himself visible, departed, leaving the two better satisfied.

"That's all right again," said Rube. "If it's not, it's the best we can do. And now, I tell you, when I go to get even I'll—"

And then there was a string of lurid threats, and altogether pretty solid evidence that the weather would be exceedingly sultry the next time they met Pinnacle Pete, the masquerader.

CHAPTER VII.

"HANDS UP, AND FINGERS EMPTY!"

It was the schedule time for the starting of the stage, and Theodosia Lande and her friend, with their one small trunk stowed in the boot, and their satchels in their hands, climbed into the coach with laggard steps, sending back a heavy protest as they went.

"Certainly, it is the most remarkable piece of ill-luck that I ever heard of. Our intended companion has disappeared—do you know what has become of her? A young lady by the name of Vandeleur. Her place is engaged, her fare actually prepaid, and now the stage is going without her. Can't you wait—you must wait. Something may have happened to her."

"Very sorry, mum; but it don't lie in ther wood," responded the driver, Nattie Wildersin.

"This hyer stage allers starts on time; an' them ez ain't hyer must put up with ther konserkwinses. P'tickler friend, I sh'd opine. Mebbe you'd better stay over tell next trip ef things remain ez they are, an' you don't want ter lose her fur good. Jest two minnits yet—make up yer mind quick."

"But I can't stay! This trip of the stage I

must go; but if you'll only promise not to start without me I will try and find her. She must be somewhere about the building, and all I want is time to go and see."

"You've got two minnits, marm," responded Nattie, totally unmoved by the warmth of the address and the beauty of the pleader. "Stage starts on time—allers."

It *did* seem a bit cruel; though for the sake of the general traveling public, it would not do to have the regulations any other than iron-clad, and as unalterable as the laws of the Medes and Persians.

"Take it easy, though, marm. Thar's a heap big lot of time in two minnits, which ther half ov those is up; an' when we start I've got ter go 'round fur old Sally Rice, an' I mout make it conveyunt ter slide back this way an' pick her up ef she sh'u'd be standin' at ther door. Hup, thar! Barney! Pete! G'lang!"

The two minutes had expired, and Wildersin was leaving on schedule, though to accommodate a lady he was actually according a few moments more grace to the missing passenger, for whom there was a great calling and a running to and fro through the house.

Nattie drove off with a flourish; but he made no great haste. If any one had looked closely to the time he was making, it would have been seen that it was but little more than an average walk. As the house at which he was to call for Sally Rice lay at the end of the town that was furthest from Hard Luck and the trail the coach was to follow, there was still a slight chance for Miss Vandeleur.

Miss Lande gave scarcely a second glance at the feminine passenger since she was craning her neck through the window to look back; but she heard her voice, and mentally felt thankful. Sally Rice was one of the kind that is hard to hurry, and she did not seem to be quite ready yet.

"Law-ze, Nat Wildersin! Whatchew chaw-pin' about? Yew hev made yer start at this eend on time, an' yew kin git in at the other eend on time; what in name ov nashun would yew worry ter? Jis' a minnit; Aunt Tilder's a-doin' up a passel ov lunch, an' I ain't goin' 'thout it—so thar, now!"

"Mebbe it mout be jest ez well ef the ole hearse didn't go at all," snorted Wildersin—though not altogether disgusted at this second delay. "Fu't one an' then t'other! I never knowed no luck when ther shebang made a bad start. Betcher a dollar we's held up by agents, er pitched inter ther drink, er suthin'. It'll all be your fault, an' ef it warn't thet I'm bound you shell hev your share I'd drive on an' leave yer. Scrabble in, though, ef yer ready now; an' you kin tell ther rest ov that ez you go along."

For Sally Rice seemed to be a snappish, dried-up, little old woman, not at all inclined to take Nattie's querulousness in good part; but decidedly anxious to give him back a good deal better than he sent.

Nevertheless she did scramble in, since the driver was quite capable of going off without her; and the stage rolled back once more toward the hotel, at which it made a temporary halt.

There was some little confusion in front of the building, and Jonas Long, the proprietor, was there, looking quite flustered.

"Strangest thing I ever heard ov in my house. Can't find huff ner hide ov her; an' nobody don't seem to guess why er when she's a-missin'. Mebbe she'll turn up; an' mebbe we'll find her. Ef we don't, ther'll be some tall lookin'. Ther ain't no signs ov her in her room 'ceptin' her baggidge, an' no one ain't seen her sence breakfast. Ther ain't no use ter keep ther stage a-waitin', an' that's my say-so. Ef she turns up soon, an' kicks about it, I'll keep her till next trip fur nothin'. Ef not I'll send yer word ter Way Back, what's bin ther racket."

"Heap ov sense in that; an' I'd jest ez soon kerry her 'nother time ez this. Got a load o' shemales 'thout her. Hi! G'lang!"

The whip cracked, the leaders jumped, the wheelers settled steadily to their work, and the coach rolled away out of Coronado—and without an occupant of the seat paid for by Miss Vandeleur.

Nattie was not far wrong in his estimate of his cargo. He had a very fair load even without the lady detective, who had so mysteriously disappeared. Of course her absence made a little easier packing the inside; but the top was full, and the front and hind boots were piled with luggage.

Prominent on top was Uriah. He had kept his own counsel, gone off to his bed, slept the sleep of the righteous and started on the return journey without molestation; while Miss Vandeleur, who had offered him her protection, did not put in an appearance. Positively, considering the nature of the men he had run against at the White Star, his luck was something wonderful.

"Kinder seems funny, young woman, for yew to be a-goin' off wile yer friend's behin' an' in trouble. Maybe she's bin a-doin' suthin'. Them perlice fellers be orful sly. Kin kerry a critter off an' nobody know where he er she went to. A friend ov yourn—maybe sister er

aunt er step-mother, er some 'un you'd jest ez soon lose ez not? 'Pears ter me, ef I hedn't nat'ral effecshun enough fur my own flesh an' blood ter stay by 'em when they's in deefikilty, I wouldn't say nuthin' more about 'em."

Aunt Sally began this as an address; but as she saw that Theodosia was not paying attention to her, she snorted out the rest in a tone that all the world might hear.

"If you please," said Theodosia, coldly, "I would just as soon not have you make any remarks about anything concerning which, you know nothing at all. Miss Vandeleur is a young lady upon whom I never set eyes before yesterday. We met by chance and found that we were traveling in the same direction, and so arranged that we would go together. I know that it was important for her to go forward, and for that reason am concerned. Surely something has happened to her; and it seems to me it was my duty to have found out about it before leaving Coronado."

"Then she ain't no blood-kin at all? Wal, that ain't so bad, then, an' ef I war you I wouldn't worrit. Ef she's ary accountshe'll turn up; ef she ain't, it's good riddance to bad rub-bidge. I gin'rally find I've trouble 'nough 'bout my own 'count 'thout worritin' over other folkses. When she gits back she'll let you know."

"Excuse me, miss, but did you say that the young lady's name was Vandeleur?"

Theodosia looked at the questioner. Troubling herself about the absence of the young lady detective, she had not yet given much thought as to who were her companions. She saw a young man, or what looked like a young man somewhat under the medium size, fashionably dressed, in clothes of decidedly Eastern cut. His face was pale, and there was something of a weary look in his cold gray eyes. The reader has already made his acquaintance under the title of Specter Sam. At the booking office he was known as S. R. Armadel.

There was nothing about the appearance of the speaker to warn Miss Lande, though to one better acquainted with the country his profession was pretty plainly indicated by his dress. To Theodosia he looked like the average gentleman, and she answered him without hesitation.

"That was the name given me, if I remember aright. Surely you have heard nothing that would explain the mystery?"

"Nothing at all, yet the name sounds strangely familiar. I must—yes, I am sure I have heard it before, though some time ago. It must have been before I went East, and that was a year ago."

A smile curved his lips; his eyes twinkled mirthfully; there was evidently something in the remembrance that amused him mightily.

Theodosia looked at him inquiringly. She understood what he meant to imply, and her eyes asked for further information.

"Understand me, I may be wrong. This may not be the same woman at all. I have no personal acquaintance with her, and I did not see the party you met yesterday. But the name is uncommon, and I suspect that the two are one. If so, you need be under no apprehension in regard to her fate. I should be more inclined to look for my pocketbook if I had been as unfortunate as to have been interviewed by her."

"My pocketbook? Indeed, I should have supposed that it was just the other way, and that if there was a likelihood of danger to it, that she would have been the one to protect it."

"Exactly. Without a doubt it *was* the same person. Miss Vandeleur has a plausible tongue and a taking manner. She masqueraded as a female detective, and created more excitement than the members of that guild usually do. Possibly she caught a glimpse of some one who knew her, and thought it desirable to disappear. This section of the country is a good deal further south than she usually operates; but all regions are alike to her, so that she can steer clear of the talons of the law. Therefore, rest easy about her. If she was the well-known confidence woman of whom I have heard, she will light on her feet wherever she goes."

"Can you be right? If so, what an escape we have had! The idea of traveling as a friend with a notorious confidence operator! It makes me shiver to think of it; and it goes to show how careful one should be in making acquaintances when on a journey."

"That is so, young woman, an' you 'member it long as you live."

Sally Rice had been listening with a great deal of interest, and several times seemed to make an effort to restrain herself from interrupting.

"I never talk to no strangers, nobow. It's jist a awful warnin', an' I'd keep quiet now, an' say no more about it—excuse me fur bein' so bold ez ter say it."

"I believe you are more than half right; but I do wish I knew the truth of the story, and what became of her."

Theodosia had the standard affection of her sex for getting the last word. She made this effort, and then sunk back in silence. The advice was good, even though the giver of it was by no means willing to follow it. For the next

hour Miss Lande had nothing to say—not even to Serena Wild, who had listened in unobtrusive silence to the conversation.

Specter Sam was discretion itself. He did not attempt to force a conversation while Theodosia was in this mood. And as his own reputation was pretty widely known, he did not know how soon the subject of his record might be undergoing ventilation.

The road to Way Back was long, rough and wearisome. After the comparative comfort of a sleeping-car and the flying wheels of the Through Express, it seemed doubly so. The day wore on and the night came down. The little community in the coach, and the other on top, each seemed to be getting somewhat acquainted within itself, though the elements of cordiality were decidedly wanting among those on the lower deck. Realizing their unprotected position, without feeling specially alarmed, the two young ladies from the East were inclined to be thoughtful, and though now and then answering a stray remark from some fellow-passenger, and occasionally saying something to each other in an undertone, their voices were seldom heard. At times they tried to read, but the jolting of the coach rendered that rather unsatisfactory; and for the most part they dozed the hours away.

When the stage stopped at Hard Luck they were glad of the chance to stretch their tired backs; and though the meal in the dining-room was not particularly appetizing, the air and the exercise had provided such a remedy for any defects in the viands that they enjoyed them keenly.

When leaving Coronado the day had been sultry and the heat inclined to be oppressive, but when they rolled out of Hard Luck every one was sensible of a change, and as night drew nearer it became certain that they would soon be overtaken by a storm.

"It might have been better for us if we had remained at Coronado until we were certain of the truth of this story about Miss Vandeleur," whispered Serena.

"Or if I had noticed the signs that I certainly should have observed, then I would have advised remaining over at Hard Luck. A day or so can make no such great difference to us, and it will be dreadful traveling through the storm at night. I wonder what sort of roads these are? It appears to me that I heard they grew worse and worse as one neared Way Back."

"Excuse me, miss," said Specter Sam, respectfully, "You need not be alarmed about the road, unless the storm should grow too violent to allow us to proceed. No matter how dark the night the horses will keep the trail, and there is nothing to be afraid of until we reach Hank Harper's shanty. If it's *very* bad we can stop there till morning; but I don't doubt we will be able to proceed. If we don't meet anything worse than the storm we will do well enough."

"What else are we likely to meet?" responded Theodosia, forgetting her resolve to say nothing more than could be helped to her companions.

"Road-agents, miss. There's a desperate gang on this trail; and they work regardless of the weather. I have rather more filthy lucre about me than is convenient for me to lose. I don't want to be obtrusive, but would it be too much trouble for you to take charge of a small roll for me until after the danger is past? A few thousands only; but it would be more than a fortune to fall back on if the Dacies should clean us out."

"But why put it in my charge? I am sure that it would be no safer with me than with you. Such people generally make a clean sweep, and if they rob one they will rob all."

"No doubt they will take all they can get; but they will search the men pretty close, while, if the gentler sex offer as much as they think the appearance of things warrants, they will accept it without much question. Of course, if you expect to make any great effort to save your own, I'd as soon my coin was in my own keeping. I can throw it in the boot and let it run its chances."

"I understand. I do not wish to refuse any such request if you think I will not be running any further personal danger by complying with it, and if the desperadoes make their appearance, I shall not attempt to keep back anything that they demand. You are better acquainted with the procedure in such cases, and I will be happy to do whatever you wish. The storm, at least, is here; I suppose the road-agents will come next?"

"Probably; but you need feel no alarm. They are rather gentlemanly fellows in the presence of the softer sex. I shall feel as though I had at least thrown an anchor to windward if you accommodate me."

"If you think the amount will be any safer in my hands I will take it, then."

She received the roll of bills that Specter Sam held toward her, without further hesitation; and certainly the transfer was made just in time, for amidst the dashing rain and howling wind arose a cry. Gleams of light, evidently from dark-lanterns that were protected from the wind, shot across the road; and a stern

voice shouted, as Nattie Wildersin reined in his snorting steeds:

"Steady thar, all. Hands up an' fingers empty."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DAISIES PLAY THE HAND OUT.

WITH the exception of Miss Lande and her friend every passenger understood the warning cry, and the rules of the etiquette which was expected to follow it. The passengers flattened themselves visibly in trying to look as small as possible, while the driver, who considered himself to be in no particular danger and who almost enjoyed such frolics, drew in with wonderful suddenness, and sat with his hands full of lines and held high above his head.

"Right hyar you got it, all jist ez you want it. Step forward an' gether up ther coin. Thar ain't no one hyar ez kicks. Treat 'em all right and you'll find 'em all square."

"Don't blow off so much steam, Nattie Wildersin. We understand what you have on board, and if the cargo treats us right we'll see that thar ain't no great harm done. But if any man shows a shooting-iron we'll cut every throat in the hearse. Now, that's solid. Get ready yer buckskins; and yer vallybles. Hyar's ther tax-c'lector comin', ter gather 'em in."

Above the mutter and roar of the storm the voice of the road-agent cut, clear and sharp, and just bolting down in the minds of everybody that he meant exactly what he said.

"Is it worth while to make a fight against that?" muttered Specter Sam in an undertone, his hands filling with pistols as he spoke.

"I stand to lose as much as any one here; and I'm willing to go with the crowd. If you say fight I'm with you all. If you don't—I'll look after the interest of the ladies. I don't suppose any harm, unless from a stray shot, would come to them, but you can't most always sometimes tell."

There was no direct answer to this appeal from those inside, and it was too late to lay plans with those outside—who composed the bulk of the male part of the cargo.

There were various, brief little exclamations of surprise and dismay, and the voice of Sally Rice arose in a prolonged howl of horror.

"All right, then," added Sam, after an instant's pause. "No time to argue. The cards are bunched and the game goes on with their deal. I'm willing. They would all play against me fu'st thing anyhow."

As if in answer, or to confirm his statement, the leader of the agents spoke again.

"Are you all done thinking? If so let us know if your hands are up. And you, Sam Armadel, go mighty slow. We'll have an eye on you from the start; and if your finger makes half a quarter of a crook down *you* go, if everything else goes along with you."

"Don't fret yourself, Captain Daisy," laughed the gambler. "The cargo inside is all tenderfeet and the sex feminine, and there won't be any shooting from our side of the house unless you hop over the line of true business. Then you'll hear me remark, if it takes the wheels off."

"Don't shove that platform out too far or we may have to knock the props out from under before we begin. We're not running any risks, and we know you shoot straight and wicked when you take the notion. Walk very straight, Samuel, or have your checks handy to cash in. You can't get much of a bead on us a night like this, but we can put that coach as full of holes as a skimmer. Fair and easy, now. You gentlemen step down and out, with your fingers up, high."

"We're all a-kinin'!" shouted Sally Rice, in a shrill falsetto, every quiver in it speaking of a thrill of strong emotion, "but, fur greshus sake let us weemin folks kin fu'st! You kin shoot him arter we git out!"

The door of the coach opened, and with a squeal of affright Sally leaped out, and into the arms of the man who was doing the talking, but who was, up to that moment, totally invisible from within. But, just then, there came out of the pitchy darkness a sudden flash of light until everything stood out in glaring distinctness on the almost black background. The source of the light was not discernible, but there it was, bearing down on that one spot only as if to render it alone visible and all else invisible. It of course came from the great open-and-shut reflector-lamps for which the road-raiders had frequent use in their night raids and tramps.

"Here, Number One, take charge of this bit of dry-goods. From the sound of her exhaust pipe I judge it's the old maid. She has an even hundred dollars in her pocket. See that you turn in that amount. That's two dollars a year. If she claims to be any younger *roast* her. If the meat turns out tender we'll own up to a mistake. Next! Miss Lande, you and Serena can step forward. You on top can get down on the other side. The porters are waiting for you there. Ah! Will you? How is that?"

From the top of the coach there came a flash, and the sharp crack of a pistol. It was undoubtedly fired more or less by guess, yet at that distance it seemed a miracle that the road-agent escaped unwounded; and just as much more

that his quick answer, fired point-blank at the spot where, a few seconds before, the flash had been, was wasted on the air.

The fact was, the instant the passenger pulled trigger he rolled off the top, over the hind boot, and crouching low darted away in the darkness. The sound of his retreating footsteps, faintly heard, prevented a volley at the stage, though two or three scattering shots hurtled vainly after, while a chorus of shouts from above discredited all connection with the one who had made his escape.

"Who was it? Number Five and Six, try and take up the trail. Bring him in dead if you can't get him alive; but don't go too far either. Such a night as this—"

The captain's anger cooled as suddenly as it arose; and though he was willing to make a cast, he recognized the almost impossibility of finding a fugitive with a dozen yards the start.

He turned again to the coach.

"What sort of a man was it that fired that shot? Speak up, somebody. Anybody know his name? Here, *you*. Tell us what you know about him; and talk loud and straight. The rest of you needn't get down unless the cargo don't pan out according to test. Just shove the valuables down, and four of you boys—Eight, Nine, Ten and Eleven—riddle the deck if there's any more foolishness."

There was a regular little army around the coach as the latest order developed. While it was being obeyed, the outlaw turned again savagely and caught by the shoulder the only man that had so far descended.

"Last time of asking. Who was the man that fired that shot? Speak quick, or give your measure for a wooden overcoat. We'll fool here in this storm till the flood comes, and all be drowned!"

"It-t-t-twa'n't a man at-t-t-tall. It-t-t-twas a b-b-boy, b-b-bout s-s-sixteen y-y-years old. I s-s-saw him l-l-last night in Coronado, an' he s-s-said he w-w-was a detective."

With much stammering and stuttering Uriah sputtered out this information, and the answer was greeted with a howl from the captain.

"You're the Fool from Way Back, and that youngster was your pard. He's got away; but don't you forget that we've froze onto *you*. The boys call you a fool, but, blame me, if I thought you were stark, staring idiot enough to run your head into the lion's mouth after the frolic of last night. We'll keep *you* where the dogs won't bite you, anyhow. Don't you stir, or I'll pick trigger."

"W-w-what yer goin' ter d-d-do?"

"Never mind that, my festive friend. Here, you boys! Have you got that luggage all out of the boot yet?"

"All out hyar!" rumbled a voice from the coach.

"Then let her roll! Drive on there, Nattie, and if we don't hear those wheels of yours a-rolling till you pass Turkey Bend, there'll be a new driver on this route next trip, and you'll be enjoying a hole in the front row in the boneyard. Let her roll! Do you hear me?"

And to emphasize his order, Dan the Daisy fired a shot so close that the bullet cut through Wildersin's bushy whiskers.

That was hint enough. Between the storm and the hurrah of business that was being done quite out of the regular routine, Nattie was pretty well abroad. He didn't know much about his passengers, and he didn't know much about the coach; but he did know that he had a fist full of lines, with quadrupeds at the other ends, and that the way was supposed to be open. He gave a howl of encouragement and brought his whip down in a zig-zag streak of sharp persuasion.

After that there was no delay.

The animals that had been restive enough, sprung away, dragging the vehicle after them at a breakneck pace, while a man was swinging himself head-first through the window of the door that had been swung sharply to as Dan the Daisy spoke.

"Stop! stop!" he shouted as he came. "You are leaving the ladies behind!"

The man was Specter Sam; and in each hand he held a derringer.

By daylight, and in earnest, Sam Armadel and his pistols would have given a very good account of themselves; but under the circumstances a better man than he could have done no more, if he had played the limit.

As he touched the ground two men sprung at him, saving him, perhaps, from an ugly fall as they seized him from either side.

"Let the fool down lightly!" shouted the captain, as though somewhat excited by the sudden attack.

"There's no danger in him, when you draw his sting, and he's too good a little man to lay out cold for doin' the clean white thing. Roll him up in a blanket if you can—kill him only if you must!"

And then, in an undertone:

"Go slow, Sam! The hearse is out of sight, and the calico won't understand the difference. This kind of weather there isn't room for much foolishness; and it wouldn't be worth while if there was. Everything has gone along straight as a string so far and the game looks very solid

just now. Put on a little bounce and then drop behind if you are bound to see the thing through."

"Orders are orders," responded Sam, in the same cautious undertone. "Lucifer wants it; and what he wants has to go, every time. I don't want to throw away any frills, though. Are they where they can hear me shouting?"

"They're not very far off, but this cussed storm hardly lets you hear yourself think. Spit it out, man, and get the thing over. The boys may get tired waiting and take hold of you for keeps. Call me a villain and a horse-thief, and be done with you."

"Why, you infernal scoundrel, do you think I am knuckling because I'm afraid of you and your gang? If I wasn't in the dark like that bull in the china shop, I'd give you something to remember me by anyhow. Do you want to raise the whole Territory at you that you are risking the lives of these ladies out in such a storm? Everybody had hands up, and if you were afraid to go through them, you shouldn't have stopped them, and ought to go out of the business."

"That's right, little man! Say your say out. I know when you talk you generally mean business, but this time we have the dead medicine on you and you ought to know it. No one wanted you; and if you had stuck to the hearse you would have been half-way to Turkey Bend by this time, with all your ducats safe and about you. Now—first thing, shell out! Look through him, boys; and turn over everything that he has. We're that much ahead."

"Take it and welcome. There's fifty I slipped in my boot for a starter, and about three hundred in the wallet in my shirt-pocket. Rifle these ladies' baggage if you please, but for Heaven's sake let them walk on, since it is too late to ride. I will escort them to the Bend. Do you think I could sit still and see such an outrage? I ask this—if you don't grant it, by heavens! I'll die trying to get it!"

"Glad you take such an interest in them—shows they're worth all I ask. And if you value them so much as to put your own precious throat in jeopardy you can have a chance to put up or shut up. They're a precious little gold mine, and the Daisies propose to work for all the ore that's in sight."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that I've had my eyes on these young ladies for some time, and always have been glad to see them working this way. I want just exactly ten thousand dollars out of the outfit before it gets away; and if they can't raise it, maybe *you* can."

Specter Sam appeared to be gradually recovering his coolness. It was in quite a different tone of voice that he spoke.

"I think I am getting at your ideas, now. You mean that you are going to hold them for a ransom of ten thousand dollars?"

"That's just the size of it."

"Everything goes on that, baggage and all?"

"Ten thou. is our figure. You can appraise the amount on hand, and we won't ask you for more than the balance. You know that Daisy Dan only says what he means, and if you listen you'll hear him talking. We'll wait a reasonable time for that amount, and then forward the corpses C. O. D. to the executor. Those are the bed-rock figures, you understand, and you can't get around them. We didn't care about having a hearse full of galoots about to offer advice when we were stringing our chips, so we sent the rest through. Now, what are you going to do about it?"

"See here, Captain Daisy—if that is the name you go by—you seem to know who I am pretty well, and you'd hardly try a bluff game on me. This whole thing is too low down, even for a road-agent; but if the game is set, I suppose the only way to do is to make the best of it and see that you ring in no advantage on the turn. You have the percentage on me now, dead, but that wouldn't make any difference if it was a single-handed game. It's only because I am looking after the interests of the ladies that you don't hear from me in a different shape. If you are going to run this sort of a lay-out the sooner we get under cover the better. Then if you will allow me to see your prisoners, and they choose to have me act as their agent in the matter, I will do what I can for them now—and for you later on."

"In the way of a hemp necktie! Ha, ha! There have been lots of men who thought they could carry that contract, but they tripped up on it—bad. All right! We'll start for cover; and as the ladies have been standing right behind you, you can talk to them as you go along. Or—it won't take but a minute. Settle it here, now."

CHAPTER IX.

THE DAISIES SKIM THE MARKET.

THE Daisies—as the outlaw clan that infested the roads to Way Back were called—had been in plenty of this kind of work since they first made their appearance on the trail. They had their haunts and their hiding-places, knew every foot and bridle-path, and were about as much at home on them in night and storm as by daylight.

With the prisoners—even down to Spector Sam—it was different. To the outlaws the storm only seemed like one of the accessories, and the dark as a convenient cloak. To the ladies it was Erebus and terror. They saw nothing, and heard but little more than the general outline of the conversation that was going on but a few yards away.

They understood, however, that they had not been altogether deserted, and that a fellow-passenger was doing his best in their behalf; and as Theodosia knew nothing about the previous record of Sam Armadel she swung to him as to an anchor to the windward, when, by permission of Captain Dan, he advanced.

Even when he was just at her side Miss Lande could scarcely make out the outline of an indistinct frown; but she recognized the voice at once.

"I am very sorry, miss, that you have fallen into such a snare; but under the circumstances I do not think you will consider any one to blame. One or two men can hardly fight a dozen, when taken at such a disadvantage; and though we might have made our escape, that would have only left *you* alone in the toils. You have heard what has been said: the question now is, how can I best aid you?"

"I have heard enough to understand the substance of the outrageous demand; must it be complied with? I want your advice, for you seem wise in the ways of such villains as these."

"Unfortunately I am," responded Sam, frankly. "Although I have been absent from these regions for some time I have lived a long while on the frontier, and have come in contact with such rascals more than once. I know these outlaws and their leader very well, by reputation. There have been worse men than Daisy Dan in the business, since they were men upon whose word no dependence at all could be placed. But what Dan says he always means; if he names a figure, it's that and nothing more; and he is not wicked for the sake of being wicked, but strictly in the way of business. Oh, you could not have fallen into the hands of a more honorable thief if you had searched the Territory all over."

"A very fair character you have given him; but not very reassuring to me. If I do not pay him the ten thousand dollars, then what?"

"It will be very uncomfortable for all of us," responded Sam, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"I can't leave you, I don't think there is the ghost of a chance to get you away, and in the course of three or four days they would probably roast us alive as an awful warning to all people against traveling without sufficient coin to meet the contingencies of the road."

"But ten thousand dollars in cash and within that time—I might as well think of delivering the moon. Two thousand dollars perhaps I might manage; but ten—I would have to wait until a letter could cross the continent and the answer come back again."

"You mistake the extent of your resources. If I had no other evidence, the mere fact of Dan demanding ten thousand would be sufficient to convince me that you would have no trouble in obtaining that amount. Draw for it, and take my word your draft will not come back dishonored."

"Will Dan the Daisy cash the draft? If so, matters may indeed be simplified."

"Scarcely," laughed Sam. "That would make it too simple. I'm afraid that draft would go to protest, credit or no credit. But some one else will, without a doubt."

"For instance?"

"I would, were I in condition to do so. Unfortunately I am almost stranded myself. You have several thousands of my money. So far as that goes, it is at your disposal. The balance—well, there is Rivers, of Way Back. He would be the man to see you through the riddle."

"Rivers?"

"Yes, Judge Eric Rivers. He is the best man in Way Back; he has the coin to give; and if you bring your case to his notice, it's as like as not he can help you in other matters. He is a power down there, and has the reputation of being just as honest as they make them."

"But, do you think that these men would run such risks? If he or any other honest man knew of this outrage, I should think there would be no rest, night or day, until the villains were hunted down."

"You forget that your presence makes a complication in the game. Until you are fairly out of the hands of the Daisies, not very much can be done. A stray bullet might put your valuable light out; and Dan would hang a dozen women sooner than lose his game, or allow a prisoner to escape. Dan understands all the chances, and will reason accordingly. He would sooner deal with Rivers than not, because he knows him to be a square man, even with a road-agent."

"And how is this dealing to be done? The gentleman will scarcely come here; and they will hardly allow me to go to him."

"That is the disagreeable duty that is to be put on my shoulders. Remember, I am entirely at your service. If you think my presence here will be of any use—if even you imagine you feel comforted by it, say the word."

Then his voice dropped still lower, and in a brief whisper, that barely reached her ears, he added:

"There is more here than you see, or I would make a break with you as it is. The trial would make it bad for the rest; and they have it set up to be almost certain death."

"Thanks for your disinterested kindness. I will admit now that I saw your face on the trains all the way from New York, and that it was something of a satisfaction when you entered the stage, and I found that you were going to Way Back. I have no one else to trust—I trust you. Whatever you think best I will do. Do you not think that is best, Serena?"

Since the appearance of the road-agents Miss Wild had maintained a masterly silence.

She did not seem to be any worse frightened than her companions; she had, indeed, whispered a few words of encouragement to Theo. When she found that they were not needed, and that no one was paying any particular attention to her, she kept her lips closed and her ears open. As for seeing anything—that was out of the question.

The direct address brought her to the front.

"It's your money, dear; and you may as well use it in getting yourself out of a bad box, as any other way. And for that matter, if you don't spend it so it looks very much as though you would not get to spend it at all. By all means take the advice of this gentleman. It seems very reasonable to me; there is nothing else to do; and we must do something. Are we going to stay here all—night?"

"I believe you are giving good advice," said Armadel, quickly, for there was a quiver in Serena's voice that seemed to indicate that she was talking herself to the verge of hysterics.

"Your stay here will only be long enough to decide what is to be done. If I am to be sent forward as a messenger it would naturally be done from this spot. They would hardly care to admit me first into the secrets of their recesses. In ten minutes more you will probably be on the move, and I doubt not that you will find they have some convenient lurking place, when you will be in passable comfort for the night. They are no fonder than you of being exposed to the storm, unless the inducement is tempting."

"Let it be so, then. You can tell this robber chief that we can place three thousand dollars in his hands, in cash; and that I will sign a draft on my bank in the East, for the balance—seven thousand dollars. I may as well come to that conclusion now as to waste several days considering and then see no other outlet at last."

"You have decided wisely, as I firmly believe. We will soon know what is to be the next move."

"Just precisely what you explained," broke in Dan the Daisy, stepping forward until his shadow could be seen, just at their sides.

"There's a little shelter, about half a mile from here, and we'll adjourn the meeting to that spot. Miss Lande can write a draft in favor of Rivers for seven thousand—I know that he'll cash it after he hears your story. Then we'll put a horse under this gentleman—it's a horse we stole, so that we won't be out a cent—and he can take the trail. A blind man couldn't miss it, and I am pretty sure he won't."

"As you will. Let us have the matter adjusted as soon as possible. I shall die if I remain here much longer."

"Not so dead, miss, as you may think. You are not the kind to suffer too much from fright. This storm is more make-believe than solid old business, and an evening out, in this salubrious climate never hurt any one. There! One of you boys keep company with this gentleman and see that he don't wander far away, while we are gone. I'll be back here inside of an hour, and attend to the rest myself. Close up here, throw the women up into the saddles, and move off."

"And w-w-what you g-g-goin' ter do with me?"

Uriah's voice was heard for the first time since he had tumbled in a heap against a convenient tree, with his hands and feet securely bound.

"Cut your throat if I hear another word out of it. That's what I ought to do now; but I'd sooner feed a fool for a week if that will do as well, and then turn him loose. You understand? All we want is to keep your mouth shut. If we can't do it one way we'll take the dead medicine on another. The first word out of your mouth and off goes your brain-pan. You go off by yourself and meditate on the advantages of being the Fool from Way Back."

That seemed to settle it. Uriah had no more to say, as he was hustled off in one direction, while Theodosia, her companion, and Sally Rice were led away in another. The silence of the old maid could only be accounted for by the fact that a plaster had been placed over her mouth that rendered it impossible to utter a syllable.

For something less than an hour Spector Sam sat under the shelter of a tree, the most of the time smoking composedly. The guard left with him as a matter of form would have entered into conversation, but Armadel answered so

briefly and in such an undertone that he settled down subdued, till Captain Dan returned.

"All right," was his salutation.

"You understand the situation, and the less we say until we know what became of the party that dove into the brush, the better. I guess the document will stand water. If not, the money has got to come anyhow. And you just jot it down, Sam Armadel, that we're not going to stand any foolishness. If you try to get away with that seven thousand the female damsels will go up the flume fu'st, and then I'll call in Spector Sam's checks if I have to chase him a year. You know me. I'll kill you, and I'll never give you a chance to know who hurt you. Here's your horse, and there's the trail to Way Back. Scatter out and play us fair. I want this thing settled up before there are too many fingers in the pie."

"Settled it is, my lord. You never heard of my throwing off—"

"That's enough. We understand all that. I'm waiting for you to start, so that I can go back to my menagerie. I expect there will be heaps of fun afloat before we get through the racket; but I don't want to begin here and with you."

"All right, old fellow. Ta, ta! I'll see you later," laughed Spector Sam, as he vaulted into his saddle. "If I don't turn up in a week you can begin looking for my corpse at Way Back."

CHAPTER X.

GID GIRTON TELLS THE NEWS.

TEN minutes after the conversation between the five conspirators Eric Rivers and Dan the Daisy had left the town of Coronado, and were flying along the road together, heading in the direction of Way Back. Spector Sam, being tired from the long journey he had just completed, and having nothing particular to do for the present, went to bed the moment after he had left Lucifer. His directions were few and brief, for Spector Sam was a man who could be trusted to do the right thing at the right time without much telling. In that way he missed the brace of affairs at the White Star and the Comet, and by chance heard nothing about them up to the time of leaving on the coach the next day.

Lucifer dropped Captain Dan between Hard Luck and Way Back, and entered the latter place on foot without attracting any attention. The animal he had ridden had been taken charge of by a man who made his appearance at a sharp whistle given just as he reached a by-road that branched off from the main trail almost within sight of the town.

He gave the man—who was employed about the Red Rock mine—a few hurried directions and words of caution. The town knew nothing of his absence, and he did not intend to call the attention of any one to the fact that he had but lately made a journey. Without discovery he reached his quarters, and in a short time he was sound asleep. He needed rest, and intended to take it while he could.

Of course he knew nothing as yet of the little racket at the White Star, or the possibility that the particulars of his scheme had been overheard by at least one unintended listener. Had he remained but a little longer in Coronado it is more than likely that Uriah would have had less chance for peaceful slumber; and had he spent the night, or what portion of it was left, at Hard Luck, or halted awhile with Dan the Daisy, he might have received the intelligence that even now was on the way to the latter. As it was, so far as he knew he had succeeded in getting control of the different interests that he thought might work against him, and now he took a breathing spell before the serious work of the campaign began.

A sound sleep removed all traces of his late journey, and he turned up in Way Back fresh, smiling, and, best of all, without any one suspecting the nature of his late absence, or dreaming that he had been at Coronado. In the semi-disguise worn by him at the place it would have taken an intimate acquaintance to recognize him; and it was not likely that he had met any such. If so it would make no great difference, though that had been carefully guarded against.

And the Eric Rivers of Way Back was a different man, from the Captain Lucifer who, a number of years before had first struck that section with the rush that went down to Hard Luck.

What he was then his conversation with his old pards has shown.

When he returned to the neighborhood—a man of some capital, and much nerve, who went with the crowd as though he came to stay—he was apparently all they wanted for a leading man, and he passed without recognition.

In the few years he had spent there he had assumed that position and kept it, in spite of all the shifting of population and the ups and downs of fortune. He had prospered, if others stood still, or went away broken up root and branch. The Red Rock Mine was paying, and there were possibilities in it that the more hopeful were yearning to see developed, claiming that the reticence

about its present prospects, shown by him and his employees, had a peculiar meaning, and that if he could get rid of a partner—name unknown—who lingered somewhere in the distance, some wonderful developments might be expected.

How the idea got afloat would have been hard to explain, but it was ventilated at times, and perhaps gave a fictitious value to the Red Rock.

Eric Rivers was a bold player, and though he was always willing to aid fortune when necessary, he knew how to do it without discovery. He believed in himself; and had no fear for anything. So far Way Back had seen nothing in his life that was not just the thing for the

If it is added that he held his own at the poker parlaments at the Mint his position and reputation have been pretty well explained.

The Mint was the saloon of the place. Nothing very gorgeous about it, everything being snug and comfortable, but the half dozen leading men of the town dropped in there of an evening to talk over current topics, enjoy Paddy Milligan's really enjoyable whisky, and occasionally to throw the pasteboards.

The absence of any of the frequenters would not be noticed unless it extended beyond several evenings, since the attendance was irregular. Of course there were plenty of other customers, who came and went, and filled up the house, and made much coin for the proprietor, but they were not the ones that gave the tone to the establishment or whom Paddy Milligan delighted to honor.

One of these special games was in progress, and the session had been prolonged. Luck had gone so nearly even that there was no great loss or gain for any one of the four who sat around the table in one corner of the room.

"For three cents I'd jump the game and retire to my virtuous couch," remarked Colonel Green. "This thing is getting tiresome. We want something to liven it up."

"Here it is, then," laughed Rivers, pointing to the bar, where the crowd was packing around a single man.

"That man has a story to tell, evidently. Shall we go and listen to it?"

"Agreed!"

The colonel threw down the deck without hesitation, and the party adjourned to the bar.

"Held up? Yer right, sue was held up! An' ef yer wait till Gid Girton gets sum more ov the cobwebs scrubbed out, I'll jest giv yer ther hull gospel, an' you kin see what Way Back are comin' to."

The speaker was a rough-looking miner, and a new arrival, who had come in on the stage, which was away behind time. He had rolled off the top, carrying a sack of dunnage in his hand, and made a break for the bar the first thing.

With strange suddenness the news of the raid of the road-agents was spread. There were not half a dozen men around when the coach stopped. In half a minute there was a score; and in five it seemed that the whole town knew what had happened, and was hungry for particulars. He had already had one drink at his own expense; there was a chance now to have half a dozen at the expense of the crowd.

The "cobwebs" went down at a gulp, and Gid Girton began to talk.

"They wa'n't after coin, mind yer; but scalps. Thar warn't a dime took, ez fur ez I see'd it; but they just hustled three skirtycoats an' two brace ov trowserloons out inter the woods, cut ther harness so ez it would jest hold out with goin' slow, an' started us on a-hoopin'."

"Three women!"

The hearers were indignant.

"Yes, three ov 'em, an' two war jest ez likely-lookin' heifers ez ever knocked a man crazy lookin' at 'em. Ther other wa'n't much ter look at, bein' Miss Sally Rice, ov Coronader; but she war a female anyhow, ef she was past tellin' her age by her mouth."

"Who were the other two?" asked Green. "By the eternal! this thing must be looked into. It's time to organize."

"They war frum 'way East somewhere; you could tell it by ther talk an' ther duds. But they war trumps, every time. Jest ez cool ez cowcumbers. Didn't hear a whimper."

"And you men stood back and saw the outrage without a kick?"

"Wal, thar war one feller did make a show; but I tell yer his sand left him, jest too quick. He picked trigger onc't, an' then lit out through ther bushes with a whole regerment a-hoopin' arter him. It war ther weemin they war arter, an' a cuss they called the Fool frum Way Back. Them war all they axed fur, an' them war all they took in ther fust place. Then a feller that war inside—Sam Armadel they called him—dove out, a shooter in each hand, an' they took him along fur balance."

Gid Girton's outline gave a very fair statement of the case, and was given without much interruption. At its conclusion Rivers invited everybody up, and then looked around.

"Gents, Colonel Green has hit it about right. We ought to organize. As long as there is a coach held up now and then, and a few dollars raked in, we don't have much call to worry. It makes the place talked of, and the outside world understands that Way Back is a good camp to

go to because it has every evidence of prosperity.

"But this is a little too much of the good thing, and it will tell for Way Back if she stops it. Green, Campton, there, who has just come in, and a couple more of us will look right into this thing. We'll get all the points Mr. Girton can give us, and if there is anything to be done we'll do it. If it takes a regiment to roust out the ruffians we'll have the regiment; and it can draw on me for the first week's pay, at full wages for every man in the outfit. If it takes longer than that to hunt them down and wipe them out, I don't know anything of the men that will be behind us."

The announcement of Rivers was greeted with a cheer. A virtuous spasm had seized the most hardened, and the regiment of Rivers seemed already an assured thing. When the committee of prominent citizens withdrew with Gid Girton to plan the course of procedure, there were fifty men swaggering around in the Mint, their hands on their revolvers and talk full of carnage.

The session of the committee lasted for some time, and as Milligan had sent in a second bottle of whisky it was evident that their labors were arduous. About the time the crowd grew anxious for a report, there was a new sensation.

A man, at the door of the Mint, threw himself from a hard-riden horse, and entered the saloon.

"I'm looking for Judge Rivers, of the Red Rock. Can any one tell me where to find him? It's urgent business, and I must see him right away."

"Thar's ther feller they called Sam Armadel, now!" exclaimed Gid Girton, who was just emerging from the little room where the council was in session.

"He kin tell ther balance, an' you'd better hustle him in."

"What's ther weemin?" roared half a dozen voices, taking in the meaning of it all in a moment.

"The ladies are safe as yet, but something must be done, and that right quickly. Where is Judge Rivers?"

CHAPTER XI.

SPECTER SAM ON DECK.

SID CAMPTON'S presence at the Mint was purely accidental. He had been waiting for the mail that was to come in on the belated coach—at least so he explained—and whiled away the time in Doctor Le Farge's office, playing single-handed euchre for nominal stakes. Luck seemed so evenly divided that the game got interesting, and just when the stage rolled into town Campton held the cards to decide a critical game, if carefully played.

In that way it came that he lingered a moment till the hands were played; and when they came out on the street the movement toward the Mint, which was only a few doors away, had begun.

He heard the story of Gid Girton without evincing much surprise, and he coldly went into the conference proposed by Eric Rivers, Le Farge going with him.

In the council-room there was a fair unanimity of opinion when it was proposed to go man-hunting.

Le Farge did suggest that by following too closely with their little army they might render the Daisies desperate and cause serious damage to the prisoners; but Rivers had an answer for that.

"We don't know much about Captain Dan, except that he has been doing some desperate work at odd times. Desperate, because he ran great risks in the doing of it. But everything goes to show that he has a very level head, and is not going to miss a chance. If we begin to crowd him he'll take the safe side. He may bluster and blow, but he's not going to make his case worse by any nonsense. And if we really have him in a corner he'll be glad enough to hand over his prisoners and swear to leave the country."

"We might invite him down to Way Back for a blow-out, and give him the freedom of the city," sneered Le Farge, who did not seem to think much of the plan of raising troops.

"Don't mistake me, doctor. I would be the last man to propose a compromise unless it was absolutely necessary. I want to pay all expenses, and I am certain the plan will work with more success than putting one or two men, however shrewd, to work up the case. There is no time for that; but if we move promptly, we may get on the trail to-night, strike them by morning, and be all back playing poker at the Mint by to-morrow evening. I only speak of letting the villains off to show that we need not be afraid of any such catastrophe as Le Farge suggests."

"I take it all back, then," said the doctor, hastily. "Perhaps you are right. You have the start of a fair brigade already in your hand, and I reckon, when they move out, the rest of the camp—the real good men—won't hesitate to follow. We're all agreed. Let's go and tell the boys."

The motion was agreed to, and so they filed into the bar-room just at the time when Specter Sam arrived, and began asking for Judge Rivers.

"Here you are!" exclaimed Rivers, taking a

few steps forward. "If you have anything for me say it quick. We are deciding on important matters and your presence may be just the thing needed to make them sure. Has your coming anything to do with obtaining the release of the three ladies taken from the stage, between here and Hard Luck?"

"You bet it has, judge! I see you are posted on the story. I've got nothing fresh to tell you about how they took us in; but I've got a good deal to say about how they can be gotten out. And it's the only way, too. I've been within the lines, and I know what I am talking about."

"I would suggest that you talk less and say more," interjected Rivers.

"Here it is, then. Maybe you've heard that I was willing to chip, but that I didn't do a blamed bit of good. It was the calico Daisy Dan was after; and he's scooped them. Now, what he says is plain, and chuck up to the mark. He intends to have ten thousand dollars out of the little trio, and he means it all."

"I'm not very flush myself, but I put my last ducat into the pot; and she had something over a thousand more. That gives her over three thousand. I've got a draft on the banker of the Croesus of the outfit; and it's for seven thousand; drawn on New York, you understand; and she wants Eric Rivers to cash it for her, as Dan the Daisy takes nothing but the hard coin. You don't run much risk in doing it, judge. I've put my little all into the pot—though, of course, it is only temporary. When the young lady reaches Way Back she will make arrangements for a further supply of the filthy lucre, and cash all the chips that may be lying around."

"Is this business; or is it all fol-de-rol?" exclaimed Rivers, sharply. "How did she come to know anything about me?"

"Well, I'll own up that I mentioned your name to her as that of a square man, who would do his level best for beauty in distress, and the chief of the gang winked the same way without any hints from anybody. It's business, though, as far as the paper goes. You'll find it good as gold, and she won't object to paying interest on your investment—the usual percentage, and perhaps a little more."

"Let up on that. When I offer to serve a woman I mean it all over, and I don't take pay for doing it. By business I mean will Daisy Dan stand by his bargain? Will the ten thousand get them safely out of his clutches? If it will the money will be forthcoming; and I'll see that he cashes the draft himself, afterward. It's time the rascal was hunted down—and we're going to do it. If you hadn't turned up when you did we would have been on the road by this time."

"I can't guarantee, of course. I'm a sort of paroled prisoner. They took me in as a sort of go-between, as I understand it. But the way things look I believe it is all on the square. If I thought it wasn't you can bet about all you're worth that I wouldn't be running my precious neck in the noose again after I had once got it clear. I'm to collect the money."

"And who is going to hold you?" asked Sid Campton, coolly. "As a stranger and a pilgrim you may be all right; but it's playing a loose game to give your wallet to any one that comes along and offers to hold it."

"I will answer for Mr. Armadel," interjected Rivers. "It has been some time since I saw the gentleman last but I don't notice much change, and if he's the same good little man that he used to be I'd trust him with a million. I'm not troubled about his end of the string. If any man living can hold it he's the one."

"Thank you, Rivers, I'm not dying with confidence in human nature myself, so that I won't take any off even at the remark of the gentleman. It's natural enough to ask such questions—if you are putting up any coin. But as long you are playing banker I don't see where his right to kick comes in. He's not your looker-out?"

"No, oh no; though I wouldn't care if he was. He knows all the cards by name," laughed Eric.

"But enough of that. I take your word as gospel; and can understand the situation without any more explanation. What do you all say, gentlemen? Are you satisfied to run the chances on the new game, or shall we go ahead with the old one? You have as much to say as I have, and I'm willing to go with the majority. The young lady seems to have had some confidence in the plan; but as she couldn't know that Way Back was going to be on its metal of course her say-so don't count more than so much."

"I don't see that it is going to hurt the rest of us," retorted Campton. "We can go after him just as well when he has the plunder, and it won't be half as hard to rally a gang if they know there's big money in it somewhere. I'm agreeable to anything excepting putting up my own money. How is it, Le Farge? What have you got to say?"

"Just as you remark. If Way Back wants to dicker with the Daisies—let her go, Gallagher! It's not my money that you run the risk of losing."

The rest were unanimous, though no one showed a very anxious disposition to lead.

"Good enough! If you're all done talking we'll consider it decided. Some one tell the boys that the road-agents have made arrangements with the ladies to pay a ransom, and that we think it safest not to move on the enemies' works until we get them out of their clutches. I'll stay here and talk the matter up with Armadel. This draft seems O. K., but there are some other considerations, and his advice ought to go for something."

"One moment if you please," again interrupted Campton.

"I understand, or believe, or have heard, or something of the kind, that these condemned idiots have another prisoner—and I've got an interest in him. How is it? Is he included in this wholesale and retail traffic? My man, Uriah, you understand? How is that, Mr.—ab—Armadel?"

Specter Sam gave a short laugh.

"You're interested in the Fool from Way Back? Good enough! Glad to hear some one has an interest in him; he hasn't sense enough to take one in himself. He got into the snarl by mistake, I should reckon. He was yanked off to ask questions of, and when the hearse rolled on he was a white elephant on hands that nobody wanted, and yet it wouldn't altogether do to turn loose! There wasn't anything said about him; but I'd almost be willing to guarantee that he will come with the rest; if he's not on the road now. But it was the ladies first. You could hardly expect me to take much account of him until they were provided for?"

"And it is one of the ladies that is putting up the money after all, though I suppose if she is as cool as everything seems to indicate, she will look after him if he needs it. Way Back would hardly suffer from his absence; but of course I wouldn't want to see him left in a squeeze like that."

"Way Back might not suffer, but I would," said Campton, in quick response. "I never left man or brute in the lurch yet, and I'm not going to begin with Uriah. If it takes coin I am ready to put it up; but you can just figure that my man comes with the rest."

"Yes, yes," Rivers said, soothingly.

"We understand your platform, and it's a solid one. If any one gets left it sha'n't be our fault. But—*place aux dames*. We'll make it a point that Uriah is to be turned over sound in wind, limb and bottom—though I don't exactly see how we are to press it. Be reasonable, Campton. What on earth would they want with your hired man?"

"Perhaps you are right," responded the other, slowly. "He's not of much importance, and so he might be overlooked. Then, if you go to hustle the gang they might knock him on the head and pitch him overboard somewhere, so he would be out of the way. I don't want to be unreasonable; but I tell you here, and tell you now, that if anything of that kind happens through negligence I'll hold every man here—except Le Farge, who's not saying much of anything—responsible. That's square talk, and I mean every word of it. Now go on with your rat-catching. There's nothing can be done before morning, anyhow."

And apparently in high dudgeon Sid Campton swung himself out of the room, followed by Le Farge.

CHAPTER XII.

PASSING THE PICKETS.

"WHAT has become of Revolver Rube and his pard?" was the first query of Eric Rivers, when he and Specter Sam were alone together. "They were to come through; and I left them under the impression that they would get here before me. I don't more than half-trust those two, though either is a mighty convenient man to have at your elbow when one wants a good job done. I'm keeping an eye on them, all the same."

"They are both bad men, and I needn't say more. You oughtn't to say anything against them. A pretty snarl they got themselves into last night by looking after your interests."

"Why? How was that?"

Briefly Specter Sam told what had happened after Rivers had taken his departure. After such a racket they were scarcely in condition to make the journey; and it would be lucky if they would be able to come into the racket at all.

If Sam Armadel expected to see any ebullition of wrath, he was sadly mistaken.

"You're sure you didn't have a hand in the mix?" asked Rivers, eying him keenly yet coolly. "There was some bad blood between you?"

"Cert, captain. I didn't know a thing about it until after I left town, or I'd have had a hand right in to the elbow. Business is business, and when I go pards with a gang, I count on sticking to them till the last horn blows. But you can see that this sheds a little light on why Dan wanted the Fool from Way Back, and makes it considerably doubtful if Sid Campton will see his man-of-all-work for a while, if not longer."

"Dan the Daisy can look out for that part of the game. Man alive! don't you see that I'm paying him ten thousand to hold out? For all his laughing ways, he's the very devil to stick to a job when he once lays it out. After getting

his eyes on the little damsel he'd follow her to purgatory, and send a dozen old pards to keep her company, before he would miss making his pile. I wanted him to finish his game before I took up mine, knowing that he would play all the lighter if he understood that I was looking on, ready to take a hand in if he cut up too rough."

"All the same, you are trusting him with ten thousand. When he gobbles that down, he may think the girl is worth as much to him as to you. And Dan is a mighty good-looking fellow."

"Do you ever remember a pard that went back on me?"

Rivers was pleasantly smiling as he asked the question; but there was some reminiscence connected with it that made Sam Armadel shiver.

"There's something in that," he answered. "I'm not squeamish myself, but I swear I don't care about remembering that. And Dan has just as good a memory; but he has nerve, and is on the make."

"I'll trust him not to play dirt, anyhow. He has just as much desire to live long as the next man; and if he runs any risks, that's professional. He takes chances. When there are no chances, he lays low. You understand that what Dan and I say, goes just as you hear it. You'll take ten thousand out to him. If he should talk about holding onto the women, give him my love, and say that if they're not here ten hours later he'll be a dead man."

"All right; you're the doctor. Run it to suit yourself. Now, as we've got a little time to spare, wouldn't it be a good idea to go over the programme you've got laid out for when they get here? I don't care for your part of it, but if I knew what I was to do, I could be studying over my lines."

"I don't see that there is much for you to do but take in the stamps. You go to bed now, and I'll start you early in the morning."

"Better start me now. As we knew what we were doing, there wasn't any use to put up any frills about how things were to be turned over, and all that; but we don't count on having half of Way Back coming out to see fair play and putting in their cursed jaw. If Campton saw the chance, he would go at the head of some such procession, and there would be fools enough along to get up the liveliest kind of a shooting-match. I don't know what your plans are, or how you feel, but don't you think it would be a good plan for you to go yourself?"

"I had not intended to, but this complication about the gentle Uriah makes a difference. I ought to see Dan, and I don't know any other way to get at it. I've been away too much as it is, but I could better spare to-morrow than a day later on."

"Then we'll start together; and three o'clock in the morning is about the time to begin the journey. Now, I'll turn in and get a few moments of snooze."

"Ditto for me, when I post a few of the boys."

"If he hasn't a scheme in his head I don't know Lucifer Lightning," thought Sam to himself, as he rolled into his bed.

"If a man could just tell who he's after, he'd know better what to do; but you bet Specter Sam's not trusting too much to the gentleman with the black eyes. It would be a cold day when he was caught sleeping by a man he knows so well as the gentle Eric. Perhaps he knows more than he lets on; and if he only suspected, he would open his cask of brimstone, stir up the fire, and make things red-hot. Ha! ha! Wouldn't Armadel squirm if Rivers could only get him on to toast? We'll have a jolly old circus here yet, and if I don't make some coin it will be because I am a corpse. For the present the ladies are safe as a church, and I've got the chance to raise a lone hand. If I play it and win, I'll be just that far ahead of the game."

Sam's reflections were not very extended, since he was pretty thoroughly tired, and he felt like making the most of a good bed. He closed his eyes to contemplate the profits of the game he had undertaken, and fell asleep before he had fairly crossed the threshold of speculation.

It seemed to him as though he had just lain down, when some one shaking his shoulder roused him up, and he found Eric Rivers by his bedside.

"Either your conscience has become a great deal sweeter, or you've got to be harder of hearing and thicker of skin. I mind the time when you would have been on your feet and both revolvers cocked before I got half-way through the door. Come along, if you mean to go. It's long past starting-time now."

"Ready, my lord, when I get a bite and a drink. You know what the rest of the camp has been doing while we slept?"

"Sleeping too, like little majors. When Campton went home peaceable, it left things in good shape to simmer down. Hustle along, now. There's no time for foolishness."

"Hustle goes! There you are!" said Armadel, a few moments later; and well mounted the two pushed away from the camp without its denizens being any the wiser.

It was a full dozen miles to the spot which had

been appointed as the place of meeting, and they urged their horses along at a rapid gait, for it was possible that they might pick up some undesirable associates if they were not beyond the radius of the settlement before daybreak; but they had no idea of meeting the Daisies for an hour yet, when they were greeted with the sharp hail:

"Halt, thar! Ef yer tries ter go through, it's at the risk ov bullits. We've got yer kivered."

The challenge was short and sharp, and as though the challenger knew his men.

More than that, to emphasize his words, there was a rattling of locks as the hammers went back that showed there were at least half a dozen firearms in the bushes where the ambuscade was laid.

There was about seven thousand dollars in the outfit, and that made the two look sharp. Without a word, they swung off their horses; the one to the right, the other to the left.

On either side they had a wall of flesh, and as they struck the ground their revolvers came out.

"Hold hard there!" sung out Rivers.

"You'll get nothing here but blue lead and cold steel, if you try to work your fingers into this pie. If it wasn't fer fear it would make a mistake all 'round fingers would have been working before this. Who are you, and what do you want?"

"Don't put on frills—them's jest the connundrums we're askin'. Speak quick, an' say how many more ther' are in yer gang."

"When you see us you have the full strength of the hand—but it's good for all the chips on the board. If you think you've got a better, string it out. Specter Sam don't take a bluff worth a cent, and if Dan the Daisy thinks he can wring in a cold deck on two old hands like us he's way off his base. We're ready fer it."

"Cold nothin'. It's all right. You kin pass on, though ther's one more hairpin thar than we war expectin' ter see. But ef ther's more behind thar they will get salted jest too quick. Ther Cap are lookin' fur a cold hand his blessed self. He told me I sh'd tell yer he war waitin' fer yer, 'cordin ter 'greement, an' thet he warn't a-doubtin' ov yer at all, but thet Way Back hez a style of chippin' in, an' ef they try it on, they'll find him ready fer it."

"Let thet rope down, then, boys. They's all right."

"Good enough, then. For about half a minute I thought it was a gum game clean through, and we were getting ready to show what we thought of it. I don't think there's any meat for the Daisies coming; but if there is, salt it. It's none of ours. So-long!"

They could just see the snake-like outline of the lariat that had been stretched across the trail. Had they dashed forward at the challenge they would have had a pretty tumble. Though they mounted and proceeded without the least hesitation, Specter Sam drew a long breath when fairly out of pistol range from the now silent bushes.

"It did look as though Dan was going to make sure of the spelter. It's a very pretty little pile to rake in, and if they had got onto the real value of the outfit, maybe what Dan said would not have gone quite so solid. But where would your army have come in at? You don't find the weasel asleep, even when he is dealing with two old fools."

"No, he's not one of the confiding kind. That war just as pretty a trick as I ever saw worked. Roll on now. If we've struck the outpost here, it can't be so far to the main body, and I'm anxious to have the first move done and over, so I can tell for sure what will be the second."

"How lucky it was we didn't shoot first and talk it up afterward. There was a show for the sweetest young circus that you have had since the old days when we all trained as pards together. I had the infernal road-agent hired, but for once in a way I didn't pull. All the same, it's a good sign that we'd better keep our eyes peeled. That may not be the end of the jamboree."

"You talk like a prophet, Sam. There's some more of the same sort on ahead. Just listen! It's one man, but he works as though he was a million."

They halted and listened. Faint, yet distinctly, came to their ears the rattle of firearms. There was evidently trouble in the distance.

CHAPTER XIII.

EVERYBODY SPEAKS THEIR MIND.

THERE was not a more disconsolate-looking fellow anywhere on the Slope, from the Tombstone district to the Alaska gold fields. Such a face! It made Dan the Daisy shake hands with himself and laugh all over, just to look at it.

For Uriah's general appearance was more debilitated than usual; his face was seamed and swollen with tears, and his eyes were red from weeping.

He was alone in the damp corner of a niche in the rock, in front of which blazed a fire, the smoke going straight up through a hole above. When Dan stepped in front of him he rolled up his fishy blue eyes and shivered all over.

"Young man, you've got yourself in a sweet old mess," said the outlaw, half-laughing, half-serious.

"I don't want you—no more than a cat wants three tails. I'm just Injun enough to believe that it's bad medicine to muss with a rank, blank, staring idiot. And if you don't fill that bill, I want to know? What in sanctified brimstone were you doing in Coronado, anyhow? And if you had to go there, what would take a man of your caliber into the White Star?"

"Th-th-the b-b-boss sent me down 'ith d-d-dust; a-a-and I went thar t-t-to g-g-git a d-d-drink."

"I swear! The animal can talk," laughed Dan, holding up his hands in seeming amazement.

"If Sid Campton trusted you with coin, he's verging on toward lunacy a good deal faster than any one suspected. What was the amount, young man? And have you turned it over?"

"You b-b-bet."

Uriah was fairly whimpering over the prospective catechism, and answered from the very bottom of his boots. Moreover he dove into his breastpocket with fierce alacrity, and brought out a much-worn and extremely debilitated-looking pocketbook, from which he extracted an Express receipt.

"Th-th-thar she are; an' I'd on'y like t-t-to have the h-h-half ov it."

"So far correct," said Dan, examining the document critically.

"A very pretty haul we missed by not knowing something about this in time. You may as well hand over the pocketbook as I can take better care of both. Ah! Shows that looks are sometimes deceiving. There's quite a comfortable little balance here. We will carry it to your credit. Now, about that drink. Why didn't you sashay right up to the bar and get it instead of shirking off into a corner by yourself? When a party of gentlemen sit down to have a bit of private conversation all to themselves it is too low for anything for a galoot like you to be browsing 'round. How much *did* you hear?"

"N-n-not a w-w-word."

"Save your tears, Uriah. I've asked you a question, and you've given me an answer. Without wishing to be impolite, or hurt your feelings, I must remark that the answer is an infernal lie. I can stand anything else but that, and as soon as I have time—which will be shortly—I think I can convince you of the error of your ways. We have a playful habit of stretching such characters as you are over a slow fire, and just roasting them."

"Oh—b-b-blazes!"

"Yes, blazes it will be. You understand. Open up fair and square and you sha'n't be harmed. The boys will feed you well, and after a few days turn you loose. Try to come the turtle game and shut up your shell, and we'll treat you like we treat the turtles—put a few coals on your back, and see if you won't walk out."

"B-b-but I d-d-don't know nothin'!"

And Uriah fairly boo hooed in anguish of soul.

"That remains to be seen. Think it over till we have the time for the barbecue. If we make a mistake about it there's no great loss. You're only half-baked at present. When I've finished you up it will be a poor judge that don't say, well done. I hate to postpone the operation and keep you in your misery; but you'll keep and there's other important business that will not. You observe the man on the other side of the fire? Well, he's watching you. Take things comfortably, for he has his orders the first kick he sees to plug you and he'll do it, and don't you forget it."

Dan's fingers sunk into the shoulder of the Fool from Way Back as he gave him a shake, and then he further emphasized his caution by a hearty kick. Uriah simply laid himself down and howled; while the captain of the Daisies went his way.

"If it was a sure thing that he didn't recognize Rivers, or hear his name mentioned," Dan was thinking, "the rest wouldn't matter so much. But if he did either I suppose the boss will want him sent over the range."

"And a precious nasty mess that makes of it, for there can't be any question but what he went right into our hands without a kick. If the tenderfeet once understood that it's no advantage to hold up when they're told, they'll begin to kick like white-headed steers as soon as they hear me yell. Confound Lightning! He'll do more to bust the business with this racket of his than a dozen detectives and a year's hard work! I'll take no more such chances in mine, if I have to skip the country. I'll talk very square to Sam if he brings the sequins—and a good dealsquarer if he don't. Curses on the meddlers! The woman leads like a spotted calf and I could have played the game myself for big money—if I had thought of the wrinkle. I suppose Lucifer will hardly go back on me; and if he don't I will have to hand her over; but if it was any one else I'd hold on till I saw what could be done. Ahem! There's some honor among thieves, but it takes a good man with a big revolver to hold 'em to it."

The messenger had reached Dan and given him the information about what had happened

at Coronado, and he could see that there might be danger in Uriah; but the longer he kept him the more he felt that the fellow might simply be telling the truth in denying that he overheard the conversation, and the less he was inclined to deal harshly with him. He believed in "luck" as much as did Durango Dave; and that crooked dealing with a little luck would work bad medicine. If it had only been a question regarding his own safety he would not have hesitated.

But in spite of Eric Rivers's expressed doubts Dan the Daisy intended to act squarely until he saw something else in the rest of the gang; and for the reason he meant to put Uriah's fate in the hands of Lucifer, to decide. Before starting out he had thoroughly tested the young man, and had formed an opinion that it would be hard to change, though as yet he scarcely knew the strength of it. Now, the time came to look after something else.

Very little attention had been paid to the matter of Uriah's comfort; but the ladies were more frail, and more valuable, so that they merited better treatment. If they were not altogether comfortable it was not the fault of the road-agents, since they had done their level best, when they had made a halt after some hours' riding.

The eyrie of the Daisies was up among the rocks that, at the perpendicular distance of half a mile, overhung the trail to Way Back. The trail to the spot was one that so far had never been discovered by any intruder, and no one that was not as well acquainted with it as the outlaw and his men would have cared or dared to follow it in night and storm.

But the road-agents thought nothing of the danger, and in the darkness the captives saw nothing of it; and they were only too glad to find themselves in a comfortable nook, which was lighted fairly by a large lantern; by the light of which they were only too glad to see their baggage. The carlike room was also furnished with two couches. One of these was appropriated by Sally Rice, while the two young ladies, when they had changed their drenched outer garments, threw themselves down upon the other.

There were but few words said. They did not care for confidential discourse until they knew more about their surroundings; and being both tired and worn they were all sleeping before many moments had elapsed.

At an early, a very early hour the two awoke simultaneously; and discovered Sally Rice sitting on the edge of her bunk, looking at them with sharp, inquisitive gaze.

"Be ye reely awake at last? I sw'ar to mussey, I can't see how yew could be sleepin' like that, an' me in sech a fix. I ain't closed my eyes a blessed wink this hull night fur thinkin' ov yew. I've rolled an' I've tumbled, I've twisted and I've tossed jest worritin' how yew was to git away. An' yew jist gittin' awake! Whar be yew frum? Are ther' many more left back there like yew?"

"You are inquisitive," said Theodosia, coldly. "Where we come from people accept the situation and mind their own business. This is uncomfortable; but I have arranged for our release—you are included in the bargain—and why should we not make the best of our uncomfortable position for the few hours we are to be in it?"

"And then it is *such* an adventure," laughed Serena. "Why, plenty of people would come two thousand miles just to meet with it. I am sure a handsomer fellow than this robber chief never lived, and he seems by no means unreasonable."

"And yow child'en air foolish enuf to b'leve that yew air goin' to be out'n yewr trouble that easy. Blind bats an' turkey buzzards! but yew're innercent!"

She upheld her hands in amazement, while pity, disgust and astonishment were about equally expressed in her sallow face.

"I certainly think it is the part of wisdom to make the very best of a bad bargain; and I fail to see how I could do better. I believe it is understood that for the sake of business, if nothing else, these men hold religiously to their bargains. If not, nothing that I could have done would have helped matters a bit. And if there is anything else, Mr. Armadel, the gentleman who at least made an effort on our behalf, and who seems wise enough, will know what it can be."

Sally Rice cackled softly. Then in a whisper, holding her hand at the side of her mouth, as though fearful that even her low tones might be overheard by some listener:

"That feller's the very wu'st one of the lot. It's bin a good many year sence I seen him, but I don't furgit. They called him Specter Sam, and if he hadn't gone away they would have hung him. I'd sooner trust this captain himself."

"You are a Job's comforter," retorted Serena. "Whatever he may have been, he has the interests of two ladies in his hands, and he will have pride enough to do the best he can for them. If you had anything better to suggest why did you not speak while there was time? Or if you have anything better now, why not

say it? We are taking hold of the situation with all the courage we can muster. Do not destroy our hope and give us nothing for it."

"Spoken like a true woman," broke in the voice of Dan the Daisy. "When our business transaction is completed you can count on my respectful assistance in any emergency. I am glad to find one person willing to do justice to a road-agent. In our business we *must* be firm, no matter what comes of it; but outside of that we are the tenderest-hearted fellows that ever drew breath."

"Spare us your compliments and your presence until you come to tell us that we are free," retorted Theodosia coldly.

"I accept the rebuke; but at the same time I am bringing that very message, in a modified form. If the gentleman to whom you intrusted your affairs moves with his usual honest promptness, he is on the road to meet me now. So certain am I of this that though other arrangements had been spoken of, I thought, if you wished it, I would run the risks and take you within hailing distance of the place of meeting. If he brings the coin, all right! You will be free so much the sooner. If he does not you will have a double trip—that's all. And the next messenger will bring the money, or some one will know the reason why."

His voice was as jovial as ever, but the words, and the shrug of his shoulders that followed them were more than a threat.

"This lady goes with me, of course?" said Theodosia, pointing to Sally Rice; who seemed too much shocked by the sudden appearance of the road-agent to utter a word.

"Oh, everything goes," laughed Dan. "We hadn't any use for her after we had captured her century, but we brought her along for company. The antique feminine has a tongue in her head—if you once get it going you can hear it a mile—but I guess she's about as harmless as they make them. Hope by the way you will not insist on our handling your trunk for the present. We wished to provide for your comfort or we never would have meddled with it. Take what you choose with you, and some time soon we will have it where you want it. I wish to start in five minutes; will you be ready?"

"Thank you. That sounds encouraging. Certainly we will be ready; if you wish we will start now."

"Five minutes will do. And please remember that there will be an army of escort, and no foolishness allowed. The Daisies may turn a prisoner loose, but they never let one get away. They *will* shoot; and if the bullets hit a woman—worse luck! That's all."

In five minutes the three were in the saddle.

The storm had passed away, and by the light of the stars they could see the dark outlines of half a dozen horsemen who silently took their places around them, three holding leading lines. What they did not see was the figure of a man, flitting noiselessly in their wake.

And the figure certainly resembled that of Uriah, of Way Back.

An hour or more they rode; and then Dan the Daisy, who had dropped behind, suddenly turned half-way in his saddle and took a quick, snap shot over his shoulder.

CHAPTER XIV.

LIVELY FOR THE BOYS.

A SHORT time after Dan the Daisy had left Uriah, the guard, having given one or two snorts of disgust, drew nearer.

Uriah was groveling on the floor, and sobbing as though his heart was breaking. Saint nor sinner could stand it unmoved.

"See hyar, young man, you want ter give us a rest on *that*. We can't hev that howlin', an' we won't hev it, ef I hev ter gin yer suthin' ter howl fur. You hear me warble?"

Probably Uriah did; for he howled considerably louder.

"I'm sot hyar ter perserve ther peace, an' I can't see ez you've got ary more right to disturb it than anybody else. Put a button on that howlin', an' do it mighty sudden. Hyar, now!"

And as the noise did not stop the road-agent swung back his foot and then swung it forward, in a mighty kick.

There was no mistake in his aim, either. It landed on that part of Uriah's anatomy at which such efforts are generally directed. The howl on which he was just then engaged, was cut through exactly in the middle, he went into the air, and then fell with a chug.

But then he howled louder than ever.

"Ef the boss on'y warn't a savin' ov yer!" the outlaw gritted, his hand on his revolver.

Then he sprang forward, and seizing the prostrate Uriah by the shoulder, lifted him bodily to his feet.

Then—

The guard did not know, and never did know, what happened next, but the fact was the left hand of the prisoner closed on his throat with a grip of steel, while the right dealt him a blow on the neck that knocked him senseless.

The victor lost no time, nor was he for a moment at fault.

He laid the man gently on the floor, until then his fingers never relaxing from that first

hold. With a dexterity that would have made Dan the Daisy creep to see, he searched the man, relieving him of his movables, his arms first of all, and then bound him, gagged him, and huddled him into the corner which he had just vacated.

"Uriah's r-r-round ez usu'l," spluttered the Fool from Way Back, unable to go without a parting salutation.

"G-g-got thar w-w-with b-b-both feet. P-p-play him fur a f-f-fool, an' you'll find him a b-b-bite."

Then he leisurely donned the overcoat and hat of his captive upon whom he had so neatly turned the tables, took up his Winchester and softly glided away.

Evidently he knew something of the place, for he turned to the right and followed a narrow passage, for a few rods. To the left lay the cabin, built against the rocks, in which the main body of the road-agents was quartered; and through which was the only outlet to the two small, underground chambers in which the captives were placed.

Had any one been standing just without, perhaps the noise of the little struggle might have reached his ears; but in such comparative silence had it all passed that the faint sounds could not reach either end of the passage, along which Uriah stole, as still as a ghost. When Dan the Daisy was listening to the conversation of the three females Uriah was almost at his elbow. In the darkness of the passage it would not have been hard to have got the same grip on him that had so summarily disposed of the guard.

But Dan the Daisy was an altogether different man; and Uriah had his scheme to carry out.

When the captain fairly entered the room, Uriah stole to the entrance and took in the conversation that followed, but at its close he flitted back to the nook he had lately left. From there he heard the passing of the captain, who was going to prepare for the journey, and his return for the captives.

This was his time.

He boldly dropped right into the rear of the little squad. In appearance he was just as good a road-agent as any of them and if he could once pass through the cabin he had but little doubt about being able to hold his own outside.

Fortunately for him Dan the Daisy had issued his orders beforehand, and took the lead from the start. Uriah, bringing up the rear of the procession attracted the attention of no one, and once outside he disappeared immediately until the start had been made.

Then he followed on for a time so closely that he passed two sentinels as a laggard from the main body. After that he dropped further back though not so far but that he still kept those in advance within range.

It was a tiresome tramp, rendered all the more difficult through having to regulate his pace by the horsemen he was dogging, and all the time keeping out of sight and hearing.

He thought he was succeeding thoroughly well. The thud of so many hoofs, muffled though they were, ought to drown any slight noise he was making, and he kept cautiously under the shade of rocks and trees, for the weather had cleared, and the stars shone brightly. But at last he came too close. The road-agents slackened their gait while descending a steep incline, and as Uriah came on at the same pace he was suddenly brought to the crest of the descent and his form was for a moment fairly lined against the sky behind him. He recognized his mistake on the instant and flung himself, with more haste than grace, to the ground.

And just at that moment the revolver of Dan the Daisy exploded, the bullet missing Uriah's cranium by a hair's breadth.

"First three right about, and take him in! I think I brought him!" shouted Dan. "If he's still on the hoof don't fool away chances but bring him. Forward! Charge!"

"Go slow, you down there!" rung back a voice that sounded entirely strange.

"I don't want to kill men, but there'll be an awful slaughter of horses if you try to crowd me. Among these rocks there ain't a man that can get within a hundred yards of me, I'll bet coin on it; and I'm holding the top of the hill with two good revolvers. If you know what's good for you you'll go on about your business, and leave me to attend to mine."

"Don't stop for chaff; down him, boys! It's coin we're playing for, and this is the last turn!"

At the hail from above the men hesitated; but Dan the Daisy struck spurs into his own horse, as he fairly ground out his order, and dashed straight at the hill. He did not have an idea who the man could be that was dogging their steps; but it was pretty certain that he was no friend.

"It was either the rankest kind of bluff, or else he's laying very low to scoop us in at close quarters," thought the captain, as the horses scrambled up the precipitous pathway, and there was nothing from the man above, or his revolvers.

If the first, the fellow, whoever it was, had doubtless fled.

If the second, though, it took the strongest kind of nerve; it showed that the man knew what he was about. While they were ascending they were protected by the darkness and the shadows. The keenest eye could not make out a figure so distinctly as to draw a certain bead; and it would be a very chance shot indeed that brought down a man.

But a few rods from the crest of the rocks there was a spot which Daisy Dan remembered as just the place for an ambushade. Possibly the intruder had retreated thither; and perhaps he had pards there who could make it very sultry for the little squad of road-agents. Even two resolute men might be invincible if they had nerve and knowledge to handle their tools.

As this thought flashed across his mind Dan almost hesitated; but it was only for an instant. Then he went forward with a reckless dash, each man with his revolver cocked and ready.

Past the spot where Dan expected the ambushade they went; but there was no spiteful revolver crack, nor any sign of a man in hiding.

A better chance than this could not be looked for if the man meant fight. It was almost certain that he had run.

Still, the captain of the Daisies was not altogether satisfied.

"Number One, dismount and feel for him up yonder! If you don't find him two of you will have to take the trail, and find where he goes to, if it takes you back to the den. I'm not sure but what it would be safest for all to hank back. There may be danger afloat, though it is strange if there is that the pickets did not scent it."

"Hark!"

Number One threw up his hand, and they all listened.

From the gorge from which they had returned came a chorus of yells, and the crack of firearms!

"Back quick! for your lives to the rescue! There's a trap to rescue the prisoners!"

Without a thought of the danger the four began their charge; and first and foremost as Captain Dan struck the top edge of the declivity he pitched heels over head, his horse dropping with a forty-four caliber bullet lodged squarely in its breast. And then a second, third and fourth flash came from below, one after the other, as regular as though as many were firing by word, and as certain as though the bullets were winged by fate.

And yet it was only one man.

As the Daisies changed up the hill he slipped nimbly along its crest, and when he had reached a spot exactly over the little party, that had halted below to await developments above, he began to drop down the almost perpendicular side of the gulch.

His motions were made with what would have seemed reckless haste had they been seen, yet he made no errors. Not a sound reached the ears of those who were just beneath. The first indication of his presence was when he sprung like a tiger at the horseman who held the leading rein of Theodosia's steed.

Even then, so silent was the attack, he might have stricken down at least another of the guards had it not been for Miss Lande's fright.

When a dark shadow sprung upon the man by her side and tore him from his horse, she gave a cry of affright and struck her own horse sharply with her hand.

The animal darted away; and at these noises the two remaining guards turned with a yell and raised the revolvers already in their hands.

The man at Serena Wild's elbow fired one shot, pretty much at random.

He did not fire again.

The first guard was already motionless; the second just had a glimpse of a dark figure springing at him as he pulled trigger. Then the steel-like fingers were on his throat.

It all went on with blinding rapidity. The third outlaw dwelt an instant on his aim, and Sally Rice, the coolest party in the whole outfit, got in her work. With a quick dart she bent over and her hand flew out straight from the shoulder.

There was a slight, dull thud and the third outlaw dropped out of his saddle as though struck by lightning, and lay motionless where he fell.

"All right, Miss Sallie," said a jovial voice. "Glad you chipped, though I think I could have made it alone. It's a straight-cut till you meet the main trail. Then turn short to the right and follow the trail to Way Back. You can't go wrong. Go quick! I'll take in the balance of these women-stealers while you are making an offing."

"Laws-a-mussy, be that you? Well, I never! What you says goes, and we're off; but yew take preshus keer ov yewrself, an' we'll see yew later. Git up!"

Serena's horse had already pushed its way alongside of Theo's—that of Sally darted between; and at a single word and the loosening of the reins she had been tightly grasping, all three swept off in the direction indicated.

After that came the attack on Daisy Dan himself. With marvelous skill, considering the

darkness and distance, the one man continued the firing until the last horse had gone down.

Then he too wheeled, and at racing speed followed after the females, leaving behind him three motionless men, and but a single available horse.

"Holy horrors!" shouted Dan, as he staggered to his feet.

"It's a straight clean-up, and one man did it! After him, boys, on footback. If this thing gets out on us, we'll be laughed off the road. We'll have 'em when they run foul of the pickets, and I'll swing him if we lose all the coin. Here, you! No skulking!"

There was one man groaning where he lay under his fallen steed. His leg was broken, and he could not move without help. The others had been more fortunate, though they had been dismounted by a sudden stumble or plunge that either flung them heavily, or caused a dismount with more speed than military precision.

In haste though the captain was, it took a little time to get started. One uninjured man helped the other to his feet, and the three rolled the dead horse off of the remaining outlaw, and propped him up against a rock.

"Some of the boys behind will hear the racket and be on to see what is the matter. Have them look after you; we've no time, though I'm sorry to leave you, Tom. I'll see that you don't want for attention, and a couple of centuries extra for a glorious old spree at head-waters. Now, then!"

So Dan the Daisy said, while they extricated the groaner. Then the four hastened down the hill to see what had happened there.

One man was crouched in the middle of the road, holding his jaw, a second was crawling feebly around on his hands and feet, swearing by instinct, and groping for his senses. The third lay motionless just where he had been flung, but his head was hard and his neck strong, so that there was no permanent damage done to him. Out of the three there was not one ready to take the trail, as a hasty examination showed.

A pistol-shot half a mile away to the front attracted Dan's attention.

"Hark! They've run against the boys. They'll have 'em, and they'll hold 'em. Follow all."

On foot the four men ran rapidly along the trail.

CHAPTER XV.

A BAD MAN IN THE BRUSH.

THE prisoners were all off in fine style. After that first unlucky start, Theodosia kept her head thoroughly, while Serena and the angular Miss Rice never lost theirs. The natural roadway, which they followed, led in such a direction that there was little doubt that it would debouch into the regular trail to Way Back, and once on that, what could stop them?

So it seemed to the female fugitives. After the ease with which they had made their escape from seven armed men, leaving them all dismounted and behind them, a scattering road-agent or two in front had little terror for them. They even wanted—or two of them did—to halt long enough to return thanks to the paladin who had appeared as if by magic and done such notable work for their rescue.

"D-d-don't sh-sh-shout till ye're out ov the w-w-woods," was the answer, once more in the stuttering tones of Uriah. "It's t-t-too good to last. F-f-fif I was alone, I wouldn't be t-t-takin' this road, you b-b-bet! L-l-lick 'em up, though; we'll travel while we k-k-kin."

It was a very shrewd guess, this, since the further they got on this road the nearer they were to danger.

While Eric Rivers and Specter Sam listened to the rattle of firearms in their front, they became aware of approaching footsteps in their rear.

Though they had ridden at a fair pace after the halt, the squad of road-agents had closed in behind, followed just out of ear-shot, and now were rapidly closing in.

"What's goin' on thar now?" asked the leader of the men, pistol in hand, as they came within speaking distance.

"Are that ary gum game ov yourn—set up ter chisel us outen ther stakes? Thar's suthin' wrong somewhar, an' I hev half a idear thet you galoots are in it. It's big money fur ter play fur."

"Drop that, you fool, or you'll find a boss that takes no nonsense!" sharply retorted Rivers, though his hands never moved toward his weapons.

At a sign from him, Specter Sam had kept silent.

"There's trouble on ahead, and you had better ride on and see where it comes in at. We'll follow on when you get a fair start, and if we must, will chip in; but it won't do to come too far to the front till we see who is playing the game. Don't waste your time here. Daisy Dan can generally take care of himself; but maybe even a weasel can be caught sleeping once in a while."

"Hyar goes, then; but ef you've bin workin' roots, ther Daisies 'll kim back at yer fur blood an' ha'r. For'ards, men! Thar's bin trouble,

an' ef it's quiet now ther cap'n may need us all ther same."

They dashed away at full speed, leaving Rivers and his pard to follow or not.

"These fellows seem to hold a mortgage on all Way Back. They need regulating a little. My fingers were itching to touch trigger, and I couldn't see how you held in."

Sam looked after the retreating forms as though he would be well pleased to try a shot in their direction.

"Don't worry. Dan and I understand each other, and it is just as well to leave the rest in the dark. At times they can be used, and a little ruffling around hurts no one as long as the camp don't see it. I'm only afraid they've run foul of a snag that may sink them and our little game together. Whatever comes follow my lead. I'll do the talking. I guess those fellows have got far enough ahead—we'll see where we are to come in at."

The road-agents, familiar as they were with the hills, were able to locate exactly the spot from whence the noise of pistol-shots had come, and they headed for it in hot haste.

When they had gone some distance they halted and listened. To their ears came faintly the muffled sounds of plunging horses.

"Hyar they come, boyees! An' there couldn't be a nicer spot to meet 'em. Ez they whoop 'round the bend we kin be layin' for 'em in ther rocks. Ef it's Dan an' the Daisies we kin give 'em ther word an' let 'em pass. Ef it's ary one else we kin jest sallervate a dozen in a holy minnit. Steady now, an' ef thar's any shootin' every man thet picks trigger must pull ter kill."

"Shell we use ther rope?"

"Nary. Ef we knowed who war comin' it mout be good ernuff; but it won't do ter make no mistakes tell we know what's behind. Steady now, they're hyar. Ready ter take aim, an' when I shoot you get in."

It was the spot for an ambushade, because every one not familiar with the location would almost certainly come to a halt and search for an outlet from the rocky amphitheater into which led the trail from above. The way led sharply back, though, until the last moment, one would think that the course was straight ahead.

"We hev 'em," whispered the outlaw, in some excitement, as four riders dashed into sight, then slackened their pace to a walk, while the leader cast about for an outlet.

"Thar's ther three women, an' what looks like one ov ther boys, but he can't play it off after trippin' up like that. We've all bin inter Way Back too often. One man ter han'le—ther weemin don't count."

And then firing a shot over the heads of the squad, in a harsh but clear voice he shouted:

"You lissen, thar! You can't git past, an' ef you'd sooner be livin' than dead jest roll off thet hoss-flesh, an' bunch yerselves with han's up an' fingers empty. We don't want ter shoot at weemin ef we don't hev ter; but weemin goes ef thar's no other way. Ain't it so, boyees? Speak up, an' let 'em know we're hyar."

"Kerrect yer be!"

"An' I'm holdin' plumb center fur ther gerloot's bread-basket."

"Hold up, er go down!"

Swiftly came the responses, the voices breaking through the early dawn upon the ears of the startled fugitives.

The difficulty was, they could see no one to fight, and no path by which to flee. The different voices were proof that there was force enough to hold the pass, the trend of which they were just beginning to see. The Daisies were not all equal to their captain, but if rumor did not lie they were all men that could and would shoot close to the center when the occasion called for it.

"Let us go back," whispered Theodosia.

"We-w-we can't. D-d-dan is comin'."

"Let's go forrads," said Sally Rice.

"W-w-we can't. They'll p-p-plug you."

"Let us stand here and fight it out," suggested Serena.

"Th-th-then they'll scoop us all. You talk back to 'em an' I'll try an' git inter ther b-b-bresh. M-m-maybe I kin git a shot."

He suited the action to the word. They had huddled together, and he slipped down among the horses so swiftly and so silently that even the eyes that were watching him did not note when and how he disappeared. Crawling on his hands and knees, hugging the ground closely, making absolutely no noise, he just vanished like smoke.

The road-agents were in no haste to rush matters. When they saw of what the outfit consisted they had little doubt but that Captain Dan would be along soon. It did not seem likely that one man could have gotten away with the whole of the escort the captain had provided for the prisoners. He might have been outwitted, but probably it was no worse, and every moment wasted brought him so much nearer.

Yet as they gave no answer, and time was flying the outlaw again spoke:

"You weemin better make up yer minds what yer goin' ter do, an' say it quick. We can't be waitin' on yer all day. Ther Cap put us hyar jest ter stop yer when yer come a-boomin' round

that bend. Are it hands up, er are we ter begin ter shoot?"

"Hands are up," answered Theodosia, composedly. "I don't suppose you will do us any harm, since it is so evidently for your own interest not. At the same time, you cannot blame us for being willing to take any chance to leave such undesirable company."

"But my hands ar'n't up," croaked a strange, masculine voice from the rocks that commanded the *cul de sac*.

"Leastwise they're up, but each one's grippin' a six, an' each six kivers a head. Maybe I can't sweep ther board, but ther'll be a power ov dead meat ef you try ter open ther ball."

The road-agent had risen from their ambushade at the apparent surrender; and but that it seemed like a breach of good faith, two at least would have dropped where they stood, for they were all bunched well together, and the revolvers were held very straight. The heads dodged down like a flash, and then the leading outlaw exclaimed:

"Don't be a fool thar! We're all in a corner now, an' if we hev to we'll make ther teeth meet in ther softest flesh. We ain't lookin' fur you, but we're drawin' a bead on ther calico. Ther next growl frum you, an' down they go."

In the little dingle, then, there was silence for a few moments. Not a sign of any one but the three females. The rocks held Uriah; the bushes concealed the outlaws; and Theo and the rest crouched low in their saddles.

Then there was the patter of running feet, and Dan the Daisy, with his men, came sweeping around the bend.

That seemed to settle it; and yet the one against eight did not throw up his cards.

"Halt thar, you! I'm running this outfit, an' I want yer ter hear me warble. You've seen how I kin shoot fur fun; ef yer crowds me you kin see how I'll shoot fur pure bizness. Daisy Dan, you answer to yer name."

"I'm here, and—"

The squad halted, and the captain began to talk; but it was only in an effort to throw the man in the rocks off his guard. Three words, and then the revolver already drawn came to a ready, and without hesitation, and aiming by guess at the spot from whence the voice came, a regular volley was fired.

"Good fur you, Danny," laughed the voice. "I could take you right in, now, ef I warn't savin' yer up fur suthin' better. Try that ag'in, an' I'll do it anyhow. Now's yer last chance ter kin ter terms an' git out ov a bad box."

Captain Dan held up his hand.

"Step forward then, with your fingers out, and sashay up the gulch with a couple of the men. These ladies and I have a little transaction to complete. When it is finished they may join you if they choose and you can all go on to Way Back. That's a better offer than yours. If you don't accept it I'm going to charge you if it takes half my men. When we're playing for coin we can stomach a little bluffing till we're ready to take the pot. Too much gets monotonous."

Captain Dan had something else in view, coolly as he talked about the bluff game the other was making. Two men had quietly dropped away, and were moving up the rocks in an effort to get a commanding position. They carried Winchesters, and if they once got to where they could draw a bead on the orator the call would be sudden and heavy. They were not there yet, and there was time enough to listen to one more speech.

"It's no bluff I'm giving you, but a chance to get out of the way of certain death. Let the ladies go by and play the rest of the game with me. I mean to see them out if it takes a wheel."

"And you're taken a bigger contract than even you can carry, Pinnacle Pete. When eight good men get one treed it don't take much of a prophet to tell that sooner or later he's bound to drop."

"No use of fooling longer, then. Let her drop."

And almost before he finished speaking he fired two shots, one after the other.

The two men who were creeping up the rocks halted as suddenly. One gave an involuntary cry; the other straightened and then lay motionless. Neither shot had been wasted.

But there was something more than a bluff game in all this, and Sally Rice seemed to have caught on to its object. Softly she had whispered to the others, and then, a step at a time, had edged her horse backward.

Theo and her friend followed suit.

The movement was a natural one. It tended to draw them out of the triangle, and so out of range of the cross-firing when the battle began. It also took them that much further in the direction of Way Back. The time might come when it would be safe to make a break.

The words, "Let her drop," sounded like a signal that the time had come.

"Now, gals!" said Sally Rice, sharply, wheeling her horse as she spoke; and again her lead was followed.

Yet, just as the dash was about to begin, two horsemen came speeding up, each with a white handkerchief in one hand, a cocked revolver in the other.

"Halt right there! If the Daisies are square men, and their captain as good as his word, this can be arranged here and now, without risk or danger. We are here to settle for your ransom."

A handsomer man than Eric Rivers never bestrode a horse, and he rode up to where he knew bullets were flying with a cold courage, and spoke to Theodosia with a polite firmness that attracted her attention and drew on her will. When he caught her bridle-rein she was content to believe it was best to submit, and so the rush to escape was stayed.

"Now then, Daniel, I'm here, with just one pard. You're trying to do your part, and we're ready for ours. What is this foolishness with that man up there? He is risking the lives of these ladies, after everything is provided for, and all they have to do is to ride peacefully away. And you're running double risks. When Sam Armadel undertakes anything, he cuts right to the line, and it would be bad medicine all around if you undertook to turn over damaged goods. Drop it, men, or Rivers and I will chip in on our own account."

"And how in the fiend's name do you come here? This was not the place of meeting. If you're a pard of that man up in the rocks, drop that handkerchief and sail in. I'll have his scalp before you leave this gulch."

"Scalp him by all means. He's a man, and must take care of himself till this little affair is wound up. We didn't find you where we were to meet, and we heard the shouting and the trumpets in the distance. We rode through the men you have strung along back, and like as not the trap has swung in behind us; but we can go back as we came, with a red mark behind us, too, if you're not on the square. But I'm not mad enough to try to take a woman through that gantlet. Say the word. Are you ready to settle with gold; or shall we start over with lead and steel?"

Specter Sam's answer was given every whit as sternly as was Daisy Dan's query, and the two men eyed the outlaws just as keenly as though they expected a volley, or a rush might follow the defiance.

"Gold goes. Here, you fellows, attend to that chief up in the rocks, and see how bad your pards are in for it. These are men we are dealing with, and I'll settle with them on a square basis. Armadel, you and the judge, with the ladies, ride on out of range. I can trust you to try no tricks, and something may happen here that it is just as well they should not see."

As he spoke, Dan the Daisy turned his back squarely toward the point from whence had come the shots that laid out the two agents, and strode along by the side of Rivers's horse.

"That's Pinnacle Pete up yonder," he said, in a low tone.

"Ever hear of him?"

In spite of himself Rivers gave a start; but his face remained unchanged as he gravely nodded.

"He's on us, big as a wolf—and I'd as soon have Satan take the trail. I dropped to him by his shooting."

And just then, from a point at the rocks, and almost at their elbows, a man sprung out.

He covered a dozen feet at a bound, and struck as he came.

Dan the Daisy heard the slight noise, and with poised pistol, wheeled—a shade too late.

The blow caught him well up on the face, though a little short.

As he staggered back Pinnacle Pete threw himself upon the horse that a little before he had captured, and which had remained alongside of Sally Rice's steed. He clapped spurs to the animal's sides, and, with a cheer, darted away unharmed, taking the trail that led to the highway and Way Back.

CHAPTER XVI.

PINNACLE PETE'S EARS BURN.

THE whole thing passed so rapidly that before they understood what had happened Pinnacle Pete was off and away.

Two of the men who had been doing picket duty did dash down into the trail and fire a couple ineffectual shots after the man who now hung low in his saddle. They would have perhaps pursued—and been followed by the greater part of the road-agents, had it not been that Daisy Dan, though on the ground and half abroad, shouted:

"Hold hard there, all!"

That brought the attention of every one back to the captain and the two strangers. The blow had not been serious, and for a moment it was uncertain but what a rush would be made toward them—though not a shot was fired.

Had Rivers or Armadel shown the least sign of agitation, or made any effort to escape, there would have been a sweeping volley fired.

But a cry of dismay from the ladies, and the dismounting of the two men, who raised Dan up, examining his hurts with some concern, showed that the party did not intend to take advantage of the diversion, and had no hand in it.

"Not exactly knocked out," said the captain of the Daisies, struggling to his feet, perfectly cool, and speaking slowly.

"But if he's just been giving us a sample of Pinnacle Pete's style, what are we going to get when he comes right down to business?"

"How in the name of vengeance did he get in the racket—and are you sure you have it straight?"

"Oh, he took a hand in at Coronado, just slaughtered Rube and Dave, and when this fellow turned up I placed him right away. There's no one else would undertake to play a lone hand with his cards. How he got here I don't know; but if what they say about him is true—and after what I've seen I'll believe 'most anything—when he starts for a place he generally arrives on time. Now then, business! It's no use to chase him, and I must be getting back to reckon up the damages."

"Business goes. I'll turn over the coin and wagon on; but I must see you again, and soon. This man is a holy terror. If he's after you, you want to settle him or skip; and if he stays around here the chances are ten to one that he will be dipping into my game a good deal deeper than will be safe, and yet I don't want to take him off—openly at least. After what has happened, he'll be a little angel with these women. But I'll talk all that over with you again, and soon. It won't do for him to live long."

All this in an undertone. From his breast Rivers drew a wallet, and with some ostentation began counting out the contents. The three stood apart and the eyes of the ladies were fixed on them. Several of the road-agents had followed cautiously after Pinnacle Pete, but the rest had closed around their prisoners, at what they understood was a signal from their captain.

Dan just glanced at the money, and stuffed it carelessly in his pocket. Then, hat in hand, he turned to Miss Lande.

"I need scarcely tell you how deeply I regret any inconvenience I may have put you to. It was simply business. I am inclined to think I have swindled myself in the operation, and if I had it to say over again, I would double the amount; but anyhow I hope we part friends. As I scarcely expect to see you again, I give you my blessing, and say, farewell!"

He gave a low and courtly bow, and then looked over his shoulder.

"So-long, gents. You've treated me white, as I could have sworn you would. Tell Way Back that the Daisies will skip this trail for a while, and it's scarcely worth while to follow them. Fight or run, we're daisies, every man of us. Now you go your way, and I'll go mine."

There was no hesitation on either side. Captain Dan took possession of the loose horses, loaded up his wounded, mounted himself, and followed by his men sedately left the spot. The semblance of pursuit after Pinnacle Pete had ceased almost as soon as it began, and the Daisies for the present seemed content to let well enough alone.

And Specter Sam seemed even in more haste.

"Judge Rivers, ladies, don't waste time in shaking hands and getting acquainted. The sooner we get out of here the better. That man is too deadly smooth; and his gang might take what he said about doubling the price as a hint. There's a bad bit of road between here and Way Back; and, it would not be pleasant to be held up again. We're out of one scrape, thank Heaven! we don't want to get into another."

Rivers acknowledged the introduction by a bend of his head and a slight lifting of his hat; but he said but little until they were fairly on the regular trail.

It was not policy to allow the ladies to imagine that this was so simple a matter as it might seem. The party hurried on for some miles, and even Miss Sally Rice, usually the most talkative of females, had but little to say, though now and then she did make a remark to Serena, in an undertone.

After some time had elapsed, however, and their pace had moderated, Miss Theodosia began to return thanks, Miss Rice to howl hysterically, and Miss Serena to look around for some one to ask questions of. On the strength of all that their progress became slower still, and the conversation animated.

"When one gets beyond the reach of law and order it certainly is a comfort to know that the personal chivalry of one or two men can be relied on. Are you the only man in Way Back that dared to come out and face the ruffians?"

"Do not think too badly of our camp," answered Rivers, gravely, as Theo asked her question in a tone of scorn.

"The great trouble was to keep her people from turning out *en masse*, and by so doing work more harm than good. In fact, we had begun to raise an army; and had Mr. Armadel delayed his coming for an hour he would have met two hundred men on the war-path."

"There is no question but what we could have tracked the villains down; but it would have taken time, and might have been attended with desperate risk to you. We found the road picketed by the agents, as we came. Had there been even a dozen of us the word would have been passed along, Dan the Daisy would have hurried you back, and once among his mountain eyries and it might have been days before he could have been forced to a surrender."

"There might have been some little trouble about hurrying us back, however. It strikes me that when you found us there was a very good-sized lion in the way. If one man could hold the whole gang at bay, it strikes me that a few good men coming to his assistance might have been able to drive them away altogether. Had you not come just when you did we should certainly have made a dash for freedom, whatever the consequences might have been. That one man! I wonder who he was, and whether we shall meet him on our way. I feel almost certain that he will never desert us until he is assured of our safety. Who was he? Do you know? Such a brave darling as he was!"

Serena's interruption should have brought a frown to the face of Eric Rivers if he had not been thoroughly on his guard; it cut all the same.

"Had you attempted it the outlaws along the trail would have retaken you before you had gone a hundred yards. If that had proved impossible—an idea scarcely credible—they would have begun to shoot to kill. As for your knight in the bushes—I am not sure that Dan the Daisy is not the better man of the two. I don't want to speak ill of him because personally I know nothing about him, but if all I have heard of him is true he is the greater desperado of the two, and on the score of morals I would back Dan the Daisy against him at two to one."

"But who was he? And how did he come to be there? Single-handed he attacked the road-agents to rescue us; and he would have succeeded, too, had we not run into an ambuscade just where the difficulty with the road compelled us to halt."

"The man's real name is more than I ever heard but he has an evil reputation as Pinnacle Pete. I did not recognize him, of course, but the road-agent averred that it was he. I only know that there is a rustler of that name, who is at the very top of the ladder; a man whom even these desperadoes prefer to handle gingerly. He would be quite capable of holding you for ransom himself. How he came to be there is all conjecture. I suspect that he may have had a design to earn the reward for the capture of the captain of the agents. You may not know that there is a thousand or two on his head. Then he may have found out how matters stood, and knowing that with ten thousand dollars at stake they would be careful how they injured you he went in to see if he could not corral that amount himself."

"But if the robbers are such terrible men I should have supposed that they would have shot anyhow. One man against a dozen! I would not have believed it. He threw them around like nine-pins. He shot, he struck, he risked his life a dozen times. Oh, it was wonderful."

Miss Wild was enthusiastic.

"And, if you remember he did very little damage. The fact is, neither party was anxious to have the ball really opened. With his advantage in position Pete would certainly have killed three or four if they had attempted to dislodge him, and he had shot in earnest; and at the same time, if the attack had really begun Daisy Dan is not the man to let go. I doubt if the war is over, either. If he knows what is good for him Pinnacle Pete will lift his noble form in some other camp besides Way Back. The agents will mark him down if he stays here. Unless he bears a charmed life I should say he is a doomed man."

"Poor fellow! But if he stays in Way Back?"

"There is where they will first look for him. No doubt some of Dan's followers are posing there now, as among our most honest citizens, and industrious miners."

The young ladies would have held up their hands if they had not had them fully occupied in the management of their steeds. They expressed their astonishment as well as they were able.

"You seem surprised at that. These men have their spies at the important points on the stage-run, and no doubt when they are with the gang, to report, they are just as bad as the worst, and no doubt they receive their share of the plunder. Certainly he has not such a gang as this about him all the time. It would break up the commissary department of the Government itself to furnish rations for such a crowd. They were no doubt gathered together for such a raid. Now that it is over, the majority will disperse, going to the surrounding camps, and Dan, with half a dozen of his stand-bys, will hide away in the mountains, unless he comes down in some disguise on the trail of vengeance. He has courage enough to attempt anything, and if Pinnacle Pete makes our camp his headquarters after what has happened, things will be very lively for the boys."

"Wonderful! wonderful! What a delightful country. Really, this gentleman—I must see him again, if only to thank him."

"You may, and probably will see more of him than you wish," responded Rivers gravely. Perhaps it was nonsense that Miss Wild was talking, but it struck him that—as he feared would be the case—they were unpleasantly much interested in Pinnacle Pete.

Yet his labor was not altogether lost. While

Miss Serena was having her say, and receiving her answers, Theodosia was having a chance in a quiet way to look over the prominent citizen of Way Back, who had come to their rescue.

She was somewhat surprised to note the correctness of his dress, after Eastern notions. Had she met him on Broadway, she would only have looked at him—if she looked at all, as a prosperous business man.

His conversational style was also unexpectedly correct. As she listened to his quiet, even tones, and the sensible way he explained the movements of the outlaws, she was very strongly impressed in his favor. And, very naturally, the higher her opinion of Eric Rivers rose, the lower dropped her estimation of Pinnacle Pete.

Still, she had not forgotten the name of the latter, or when she had first heard it, and though she kept the idea to herself, she half suspected that he had been sent on their trail by the lady detective, whose sudden disappearance at Coronado had been so puzzling. And though no doubt the man was desperate enough, still she had learned the lesson that desperate men might have their uses.

While she was thinking over this, and almost imagining that in Judge Rivers she would find a man she could trust, he turned toward her, and began to ask concerning their captivity. Once started on that, and for the time the three females seemed to be able to think of nothing else, and the subject lasted them until they reached the vicinity of Way Back.

CHAPTER XVII.

A MASS-MEETING AT WAY BACK.

WAY BACK, after its morning eye-opener, and some little investigation, was inclined to kick, hot and heavy. There was no doubt but that Eric Rivers and Armadel had started on the mission alone, and though the profit could not amount to much, the honor and glory which they would attain when they brought in the prisoners in safety, were worth sharing around.

The morning passed in discussing the chances in the case, and making guesses, of how long it would be before Rivers would arrive, but after dinner the tongues of every one went a little slower. It was fully the time when the best judges expected him back. The crowd stood around, and grew, and murmurs began to rise that something must have happened and that something ought to be done.

A reception committee had been named, and now it was whispered that it should be a league of vengeance. Captain Cy de France had even mounted a box that was rolled out to serve as a rostrum, and got as far as, "Friends an' feller-citizens," when there was a diversion that drove all such things away in a hurry. In the distance was heard the clatter and patter of horses' feet.

De France was left without a single auditor—and he did not care. He was one of the first to head the rush that started in the direction of the arrivals.

So, at a breakneck gallop, the three ladies, and their escort of two, came dashing into Way Back, to find themselves confronted by the whole population, cheering to the echo.

Way Back really was glad of an excuse to show a little enthusiasm. If there had been none the cheering would have gone on all the same; and not without reason. A prettier sight than Theodosia and her friend, as they came at a gallop down the street, had certainly never been seen in the tough little town. It is not worth while to tell a story, and say that the young ladies had not felt their journey.

They were tired—terribly so.

But here they were at the objective point of their journey, and they had reached it without personal harm, and with only a little delay. It is true Miss Lande had expended a matter of ten thousand dollars on the way; but that was a contingent expense that would not be likely to again arise.

Rivers had warned her that the camp would turn out, in force, to meet her; but she had not yet been able to appreciate the heartiness of the reception that would be accorded her. When she heard everybody shouting, and saw them waving their hats, she bowed gracefully, and felt really touched. It might have been hard just then to have convinced her of the real nature of some of the shouters.

Eric Rivers boarded at the Early Dawn Hotel, kept by John Partridge; so, to that hotel they all went.

The judge was quick in his movements, but he was not quite quick enough. He leaped gracefully from his horse; but so did Theo, at the same time, and she was assisted by a reasonably respectable looking young man, who sprung forward, as he saw her looking around with the air of one who was in haste. She and Serena tripped lightly up the steps, to the porch.

There John Partridge met them. The proprietor was politeness itself, and he had them ushered into the house before they knew what was going on, for Captain De France, and his committee were edging forward through the crowd.

Not to be denied were they; and Eric Rivers was not the man to balk them, since he would

figure prominently in the affair. He came into the little waiting-room, for he had halted a moment on the porch, to confer with the leaders of the crowd.

"You will have one more trial, Miss Lande, before you settle down to the rest that you so much need. Perhaps it is more a matter of justice than of pleasure to themselves, but Way Back wants to tender its congratulations, and assure you that every man of her population would have been ready to rush to the rescue had not your message seemed to indicate a better way. It will only require a moment—and a little courage. After facing the road-agents you will hardly hesitate at bowing to our prominent citizens."

He smiled as he spoke, and waved his hand toward the crowd that could be seen through the window near which he was standing.

Theodosia laughed outright, if a little nervously. The prominent citizens, for the most part, wore red shirts and had revolvers buckled to their waists.

"I shall be happy to meet them," she said. "It may save time, and trouble even, to do so; and with Serena and Miss Rice at my elbows, I shall not feel altogether alone."

So Rivers led the three out upon the porch and presented them after the most approved style.

Captain De France made his little speech of reception, expressing bluffly but with quite ready eloquence the regrets of the camp that she had met with such an unpleasant mishap on the way there, its delight that it was no worse, and closing with a tender of the hospitalities of the camp with an almost Mexican exaggeration of politeness.

Miss Lande bowed, smiled, and then, on the impulse of the moment, made a very pretty little speech, if it was somewhat over the heads of the people.

And at the close she added:

"I have not come among you to invest, though I may before I leave you. I have nothing to say against the effete civilization of the East—it is good enough for me. I am not here for the benefit of my health—I don't think I ever had a sick day in my life—and I did not come out as a missionary. I am not sure that I do not rather need the services of one myself. But I heard that my brother, Rolland Lande, was to be found at Way Back, and I came to see him. I have been assured, since I came into the neighborhood, that he never was a permanent resident of this camp, and it is exceedingly doubtful if he ever made any stay in it. Yet, some one in this crowd may know him; some one may have seen him. If so, if he would earn my thanks and any reward he may choose to name, let him tell me all he can about the boy I have not seen for a dozen years, and to meet whom I would be willing to pass through still greater dangers than any I have yet encountered, and cheerfully pay out a still larger sum than my little adventure with the road-agent cost me. Is there any one here who ever heard of Rolland Lande?"

The appeal was followed by a momentary silence, in which there was a general snaking of heads.

Then a voice spoke up:

"Excuse me, miss, for speaking, but there's one thing I might tell you. You sent a letter to Rolland Lande, some weeks ago, with an order on the back to return it in ten days if not delivered?"

"I did—not one of them, but half a dozen. How do you know?"

"I'm postmaster here, miss, and I just remember that one letter. I'll swear to it that there were no others."

"And how does it come that it was not returned as ordered—or did some one call for it?"

"Somebody called for it, and that's the queer part of the story. The office was robbed the night after it came, and that was one of the letters that turned up missing. I don't want to discourage you, but if you've been corresponding with anybody around here for your brother, I wouldn't wonder if it was all a plant of the Daisies; and if so, miss, and they got you clean across the earth like that, they let you off mighty cheap at ten thousand dollars. I don't want to scare you, but if I was in your place I'd keep a bright lookout. I'm afraid that you're not done with them yet."

Theodosia seemed too much taken aback to answer at once, and Eric Rivers answered for her.

"Many thanks to you, Rob, for your explanation; though it may give the lady the heartache to know that she has been the subject of what was worse than a jest. But I think I can speak for Way Back, and say that we guarantee her safety here. When she is ready to take the back trail, if she will accept of their escort, I'll give my boys at the Red Rock a holiday, and will take the trail to Coronado together, sooner than she shall run any further risks. Now, you may judge how worn-out the ladies are. No doubt they would be willing to entertain us further with a history of what they have gone through, but we ought not to ask it. Partridge has a meal ready for us, and if they ain't half starved, I am. This meeting stands adjourned,

but those that choose to drop in at the Mint a little after sundown, will be welcomed by yours truly."

So the crowd dispersed with three cheers for the ladies and three more for Judge Rivers, and the five retired to the dining-room to discuss the bountiful meal that Partridge had provided.

"All right that, no doubt," whispered Specter Sam, as they went along, "but what in the name of blue wrath do you want to get a gang together at the Mint for? You've some scheme on foot."

"If that infernal Pinnacle Pete is here, and has any scheme on foot as regards us, I want to give him a chance to talk right out in meeting. He might fight shy if he thought there would only be a few around; but if he knows there will be a crowd, he'll show up sure."

"Must be a bad sort of a man from the way you and Dan handle him. Something new that's turned up while I was gone. Who is he?"

"You heard what Dan said. He's Satan on wheels. The question is whether he's after us or after Dan. If he has tumbled onto this racket, I must know it. As long as he is holding the age on our game, there's not much use to back our hand. He's been around on several occasions that I've heard of, and he always took the stakes."

"What you going to do about it, then—not jump the game?"

"Scarcely, while Dan is ahead. You see, Peter is a very good man, and he knows it; but so far he has not just happened to run against me. I'll make sure that his fingers are reaching for our ante, and then—"

"Then what?"

Sam spoke shortly, sharply, and in a little louder tone than was altogether safe when discussing such matters. Rivers dropped his voice still lower, so that his words seemed more impressive than ever, as he hissed into his partner's ear:

"Then he must die, and our hands must not be seen in the taking off. That will be my job, and I'll have it done to nature."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A WHISPER FROM THE WALL.

IN the stage, previous to the attack of the Daisies, Miss Sally Rice had a good deal to say about herself and her mission.

Very strangely, the latter was one almost identical with that of Theodosia, though as she had very loudly announced her errand before Miss Lande had given a hint of hers, the strangeness was really the other way.

After the trouble began the antique maiden lady kept reasonably quiet. She did not exactly seem overwhelmed with terror; but excepting when she broke out on waking she was silent, looking sharply around as if anxious to get the first glimpse of what came next—and very much afraid that it would be something dreadful.

She was cool enough at the different crises, and once or twice was shrewd enough to see when and how to take advantage of the chances, but after Rivers and Armadell came on the stage she got so far into the background that her presence was almost forgotten, except when she was hysterically shouting her thanks, and bemoaning the loss of her hundred dollars.

Rivers had kindly and quietly, spoken a few words of consolation, Theodosia had assured her of temporary assistance if it should be needed; and after that she plodded along, with a look half dogged and half exhausted.

But Partridge's table, where she found breakfast, dinner and supper all rolled together in one grand meal, brought her to herself completely, and she began to manifest an interest in her own affairs that made Theo smile to listen to.

The first effort was with the worthy landlord. "Say, yew! I'm a poor lone woman, an' it wouldn't be more ner Christian tew help me along. Hev yew seen airy thing in these parts ov Bobby Rice?"

"Nary thing ov man er boy ov sich a name," responded Partridge.

"He never stopped at the Early Dawn, an' ef he drawed his rashuns at ary other ov ther hash-houses in this burg I wouldn't hev knowed it. Ef yer wants ter find out better ax Bob Patterson, ther postmaster. I ain't much on ther d'reck'ory, an' I don't keep track ov all ther Bobbys, an' Billys, that come hyer ter-day, an' skips out ter-morrer. But Bob Patterson does, bein' it's in ther line ov his biz. Yer sure he ain't ther man hisself?"

"I reckon I be—leastwise if that's him az was talkin' afore ther crowd. He's tall ernuf tew make two ov my Bobby: an' thin ernuf not to be half ez big. He's my long-lost brother, that I've bin hunting round at Coronado, whar I bin stayin' fur some time; an' I heard he'd bin seen here—an' didn't I come a-hoopin' when they told me. Yew sure yew ain't seen him?"

"Dead sure. I ain't had nouse fur ary Bobby Rice in mine."

"An' ain't nobody seen him? Young man, ain't yew hed eyes on him? Yew look ez though yew seen most everything that's going."

She turned sharply to the Chinese waiter and man of all work, who happened to be near, and

for the moment was listening with an idiotic grin on his Mongolian features.

"Wau Wing no suah, but t'ink he little use. Glil mean shlot spotlee flom chickee kick. He bin on lip loundee town. Whah he now go to Wau Wing no can tell. Glil go lookse; maybe littee use fust chop, maybe no. Allee same, that best Wau Wing kin do."

"Blazes!" ejaculated Partridge. "The heathen Chinese has hit the use fust thing. He means that there is a man in town on the racket, whose name, ez fur ez the boys had it, are ther Short Sport from Chicken Creek. That may be the man; better try him, anyhow."

"Oh, that must be the man. He is as broad as he's long, an' I knew he was at Chicken Creek. That's the man! Whar, oh, whar kin I find him?"

"Ther heathen's gin yer a p'inter; jest you lissen to him whissel. He says maybe he's gone outen town, an' mebbe he ain't; an' no one else knows a blame thing more. Ef you'll hold yer hosses till ther things are cleared up, I'll send Wau Wing out ter hunt him up."

The Chinaman shook his head in horror.

"Wau Wing no haf use foah he. Him short man flom China side; him speaks to be. Glil bettee go hisself if he wanthee findee. Him bad man—belley badee. Him makes things hot when Wau Wing tly bling him 'longside ullydone."

"Ther Chinese are right, miss. Ther Short Sport are death on the heathen, an' ef Wau Wing went prancing 'round him he'd be very apt to shoot on sight. You'll have to go 'long with him, or I'll be short a heathen. But you kin git ary one of ther boys ter look 'round fer yer, an' ef they find ther cuss, an' he's in any kinder good-humor, he mout tell him you're hyer, an' lookin' fur him."

"Is he—kin he be sich a awful bad man? An' I ain't seen him fur years?"

"Purty bad, miss; but he's all solid sand, you bet. What he says goes, er he wouldn't be livin' now. Mebbe ef his sister—wich I s'pose you be—war to take hold, she might tone him down a bit. It's worth while, fur he'll strike ther wrong gang some night, an' then salt won't save him."

"An' him only a leety, teenty boy jist yesterday! Mammy said I sh'd allers look arter him, an' I bin a-tryin' ter do it, but he's allus bin so dreifful onstiddy! Now I can't hardly b'lieve he's growed up sich a man. Shoot the Chinaman, would he? Dear! dear! An' I can't altogether blame him. Times are when I feel a heap like shootin' 'em myself. Not but what this one are reel nice lookin'; but consarn a heathen, anyhow! An' much obleeged am I ter you fur lettin' him go 'long after supper."

"You havent any notion of stayin' hyer, hev you?" inquired Partridge, beginning to show more interest in a relative of the Short Sport from Chicken Creek.

"Do I look ez tho' I'd stay in sich a mizzible, dod-rotted, boss-stealin', man-killin' country ez this? I'm goin' tew see Bobby, an' then I'm goin' tew git next stage ef he goes er not. One hundred dollars ov my good money az I made by my own hard labor did ther reptiles take, an' twis lady, ef she hedn't kindly offer'd tew help me along till I c'd find Bobby, an' git a loan, I dunno whar I'd kin in at."

"Wal, yer looks like a right spry sorter leetle wooman, an' I war goin' ter remark, ef yer wants ter take hold at ther Early Dawn you kin earn yer vittals, an' wages ter suit. It don't take long ter make a hundred dollars in this hyer camp, so yer needn't worry ef yer are shoal on ther bar. John Partridge allers knows how ter be white to ther sex ef they do ther clean thing themselves. Think it over, an' ef yer don't find yer brother, er feel fur a job, let me know in ther mornin', an' I'll 'range accordin'."

If Theodosia had not been prejudiced against Miss Rice she would perhaps have manifested more interest in her affairs, but somehow she had very illogically connected her with the loss of Millie Vandeleur, and since then had not taken to her.

Yet the similarity in their situations had its effect, and she began to see that the woman was shrewder than she had believed. At any rate her movements so far had been more expeditious, and it seemed quite likely that her expectation would be crowned with success. Too tired to do anything further to-night, Miss Lande and her companion were about to retire, but before doing so she ventured a word or two to Sally.

"I have heard you speak of starting out to look for your brother through town. Do you think it is altogether prudent to be wandering through the camp after dark? I am as anxious as yourself to begin, but I feel that I can do nothing before to-morrow. Certainly you need rest as badly as I do—perhaps worse—and it would, I think, be better for you to take it."

"Thanks, but that ain't my style. What's got ter be did hes got ter be did; an' ther' may ez well be an end tew it. But I'll keep an eye out fur yew too, an' ef I see or hear anything that fits inter your hand, I'll let yer know."

So the two went off to their room, and small and meanly furnished though it was they could

enjoy its little comforts in a way they never could have done before spending the best part of a night in the outlaws' cave.

"Somewhat discouraging?" asked Serena, as she noted the weary look with which her friend glanced around.

"Somewhat, I admit. Yet I do not yet fear for our final success."

"But, you goose you, can't you see that your brother has never been here at all? There must have been a deeply laid plot to inveigle you all the way from New York, and Dan the Daisy was just the introductory overture. What will come next, Heaven only knows."

"And Heaven will protect me. I have had some little talk with Judge Rivers—a very fine man he appears to be—and he assures me that it would be folly to leave here until every covert has been examined, and every clew run down. While they may have found out something about brother Rolland from my letters, yet it looks altogether natural to suppose that if they had not known something about him they would never have tried to personate him. Mr. Rivers has promised to give me his assistance, and between us it will be strange if we do not succeed. And I feel sure that at least some of the letters I received were from brother."

"Have it your own way, dear. I have seen the country, and am perfectly willing to leave it forever on the next stage; or I will stay until you have found Rolland or lost hope altogether. But if we do remain, you can be sure that our adventures have only just begun. Meantime, what do you think became of our lady detective? I have a suspicion—a faint, but tolerably clear one—that she saw what was good for her, and gracefully retired. And little blame to her for it. I think if we had known what was to happen on the road from Coronado we would have taken another route or stayed at home altogether."

"Do not blame her until we know the whole truth. I am more afraid that something serious has befallen her. In any event the friend she spoke of made his appearance. Although he seems, on general principles, to be rather an undesirable acquaintance, yet we cannot say that he did not do his best in our behalf."

"Hum—yes; if it was not all a farce. Perhaps he, too, is in the league. Theodosia, I begin to suspect everybody."

"Even poor Sally Rice?"

"Yes, even poor Sally Rice—and her brother, the Short Sport from Chicken Creek. Oh, dear! what a name! What people!"

"Nevertheless, my dear, I have a little scheme of my own in connection with that same Short Sport, provided he turns out to be at all practicable."

"One of Mr. Rivers's suggestions?"

"Don't be sarcastic; it is an idea entirely of my own, and so far only an idea. I must have some one to work for me, and I see it must be some one with brains, and that fears neither man nor angel."

And then came an interruption, as strange as it was startling—the voice of the lady detective, asking:

"Don't you think Pinnacle Pete fills that bill?"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE SHORT SPORT'S SISTER TAKES A HAND.

THE assemblage at the Mint was large and enthusiastic; and it was promptly convened at early candlelight. Thirst and curiosity brought the town; and Judge Rivers was there to receive them.

Of course there was no formal speech-making and no open barrel of free whisky. But there was a good deal of talking and laughing. Rivers answered a number of questions, and called up the house to drink. There were numerous threats made as to what would be done to the Daisies if they continued in that neighborhood, and some speculation as to where they would go with their plunder.

And then, when the interest in the subject had begun to flag, and Billy Morgan was taking his seat behind his lay-out, Sid Campton came gliding toward the judge.

"There's one little piece of information I've been waiting to hear, but it don't come worth a cent, Rivers. You generally have a clear head and get onto things straight as they are. What became of my man, Uriah?"

"Whew!"

Eric Rivers did not have much to say to the question, but the one word that he did say was quite expressive.

"That's the size of it, eh? I half thought so when I left the matter in your hands. And I more than half thought so when I found you had slipped off before daybreak, without giving us a chance to chip."

"Campton, I swear I didn't mean it. I wouldn't go back on a dog that was howling in their hands, much less a man that you had an interest in. Fact is, things were so lively that we never once thought of the gentle Uriah. He'll come out all right, though. Trust a fool for luck and you can't go wrong."

"Maybe yes, and maybe no; but it seems to me I said very square what I thought in the matter. I didn't much believe that you'd bring

him along, but I did have an idea that you would find out what they wanted to do about him."

"Sorry am I. I wouldn't have had it happen for a little fortune. The Daisies didn't say a word about him, and I was so glad to get out myself that I asked no questions. I don't know what they could want with him, and I'd be willing to gamble on his luck; but, if you can't wait, I'm ready to march right out on the trail."

"And a heap of good would that do. If I understand it right, Captain Dan had his luggage all packed, and was leaving by the first boat. The next boat won't be likely to catch him this side of the jumping-off place, and meantime what do you suppose is going to be done with Uriah?"

"They'll turn him loose, and be glad to get rid of him. What in the name of all the saints do you suppose they would want with such an idiot?"

"That's just it. They don't want him; and they'd cut his throat before they would let him go. Before I'd throw off on a poor half-witted fellow like he is, I'd go put my head in soak till the brains slashed out of the tops of my boots."

Nevertheless Eric Rivers never lost his temper or his coolness.

"Just look here a moment, Campton. It strikes me that you are trying to set up a quarrel with me. If so it won't work unless you crowd things a good deal harder than I think you would be willing. With a private graveyard such as I own, and a record as long as the moral law, the community at large are not going to trouble themselves very greatly if I refuse to feel bullied or bothered. I can afford to take all such nonsense at what it is worth, and it wouldn't be the smallest kind of a feather in my cap if I took you into camp for what you've said. Take my advice. Go quietly home and possess your soul with patience. I'll bet two to one with you or any other man that if you give him time he will make his appearance without a scratch. Come! Money talks!"

There were very few other men that could have afforded to talk that way to Sid Campton. It made little difference which way the latter took the remarks. If he quieted down under them it was to the credit of the judge. If he flared up and got shot no one could blame Rivers. That he would accept the banter and put up his coin was not for a moment to be supposed—and there were a number of interested spectators.

"Young man," broke in a sharp, shrewish voice, just in time to prevent Campton's answer from being made.

"Don't yew bet onless yew know what yew're bettin' on. I waz thar, an' seen ther hull thing. Mebbe thet man waz a fool, an' mebbe he waz a big fool; but he ain't thar now, an' he played them road-agents ther rattlin'est game thet I ever did see played. Why, he waz jist a-leadin' ov 'em on—an' ef this hyer gentleman hedn't put his fingers in ther pie he'd 'a' scooped the hull on 'em an' not bed a big mouthful then. Thar wazn't but two men took off'n that stage, ez you very well know. Thar stan's one ov 'em," pointing to Specter Sam; "an' ther other waz Pinnacle Pete. Ef he went it waz beca' he wanted tew go along; an' when he got tired a-goin' he quit; an' that's ther hull ov it. When ther time comes he'll turn up sirene, an' that man Rivers are offerin' ter bet on a sure thing."

Eric Rivers was too astonished to interrupt. The intelligence struck him all in a heap, and it was Sid Campton who spoke.

"What nonsense is that you are trying to give us? Uriah was on the hearse when it was held up, and Uriah it was who went away with them into the mountains. Here, Mr. Armadel knows."

"I ought to. The stuttering fool could hardly be mistaken for any one else."

"He could stutter like a house afire; an' he could talk az straight az a string. I heard him do both. Ef that's yewr man Uriah, yew'll find him tew hum; an' ef he ain't then he warn't on ther stage at all. That's jist solid."

"And who are you?" asked Sid Campton, recovered somewhat from his surprise.

"I'm Sally Rice, last from Corrynado, lookin' fur my brother, ther Short Sport from Chicken Krick. You want tew treat me respectful, young man, er Bobby'll wreck ther town. I'm a bad little man myself."

The little woman drew herself up, and scowled around her as she spoke, in a way that elicited a roar of laughter from the bystanders.

"Yew kin laif ef you please, but that don't hurt ther cold truth. When a poor, lone woman gits ter goin' you don't want tew put much apast her, an' I don't want no man a-livin' ter tell me thet I lie. I sed thet Pinnacle Pete was aboard that stage; had hisself tookin prisoner; an' when he got tired ov it made things so lively fur ther boys you never see. Who says it ain't so?"

She glanced around her so fiercely that the merriment ceased.

"Not I, old lady," said Campton, with a shrug of his shoulders. "You've given me a wrinkle not down in the regular bills, and I

think I'll go and look into it a little. It would be just like the infernal idiot not to have been on the stage at all. It's a matter of a thousand dollars, more or less, to me. Thank you very kindly for the pointer, madam; and if I can do anything for you, just let me know."

"Yew kin, yew kin. Tell me, oh, tell me whar will I find Bobby Rice? They said ef he war in town I'd find him at ther Mint; but I can't see nothin' ov him hyer now."

"It's 'most too early in the evening. If you want to interview him call again later on. He'll probably be around again, and no doubt be glad to see you. Good-night. I'm off to find out just what Nattie Wildersin had to say on the subject."

"An' while I'm a-waitin', ain't ther' nobody az would like tew make ther time pass pleasant? I hev jist ten dollars that I borried. It may az well be twenty er nothin'. When Bobby kims he'll stake me, an' ef he won't I kin borry ag'in, an' I won't be no wuss off."

The defiance waked up the natives. It might be that it was only a bit of braggadocia; but then again this might be some feminine card-sharp of phenomenal skill, who, either alone or in conjunction with the Short Sport, intended to work the camp.

Yet it seemed a little ridiculous for the best card-sharps to sit down to play with a woman whose capital was ten dollars only. And the sharps that were not so sharp were rather afraid to tackle her.

"Noboddy byer!" she reported. "An' I thort thet Way Back was so full of fun thet yew couldn't find a tear for a funeral. Ten dollars, good an' lawful money, awaitin' the man thet's got nerve enough tew take it. Jedge, ain't yew got time tew make it a leetle interestin'? Man an' money's a-waitin', an' they say yew're a steam-injine, tew."

"What sort of a game do you want to invest in?" retorted the judge, blandly.

"Ary thing, frum whistle-jack tew draw poker. I ain't got ernuff ter invest on sheer luck er I'd say I'd soonest ov all hev a turn at ther tiger. But till my pile is a wee bit larger, I'd prefer suthin' whar I make my own chances, an' work whar I've got a leetle surer show."

"They don't seem to answer up very quick, and I guess they are waiting to hear me talk," laughed Rivers, after remaining silent long enough for any anxious souls to have a chance. "Here's a couple friends that will join me, I am sure; and though we hardly make it up to brilliancy the way things go, we'll try our level best to have a comfortable time until your brother gets in from the rural districts. Take a chair, Miss Rice—they are convenient; and here's a pack of cards. We'll throw around for deal, and I hope you will get it. I never like to see the first stacks coming my way."

It was not the first time a woman had been seen at the card-tables in the Mint; but the ladies who had sparkled through the camp at various times had generally looked a good deal younger and possessed a softer tongue, though on occasions they could use it to just as good an advantage. The defiance of Sally Rice really shocked no one; though, considering her general appearance, which was staid and sober in comparison with the outfit of the late Rustlin' Ruth, there was some surprise.

"Ah, you have it," continued the judge, as an ace dropped to Miss Rice's side.

"I suppose twenty-five cents ante and a two-dollar limit will about agree with your resources."

"Young man, don't be crowdin' your Aunt Sally too hard. We don't want no limit tew this game, ez long ez I git a sight fur my money. It won't be long afore I'll be sizin' yewr pile; an' ez we go along I won't be interferin' with yewr game. I ain't perposin' this jist fur fun, an' we might play all night on a tew-dollar limit."

"Any way you choose, aunty. The cards are with you, and we are all waiting. This is Colonel Green; this Doctor De France; Mr. Armadel you have had the pleasure of meeting before. Now, let them go."

The little, brown, wrinkled fingers handled the cards with a fair amount of grace, and dropped them where they belonged; but there was nothing in her style that was very alarming to old hands like Armadel and Rivers.

Yet they watched her narrowly, for Eric Rivers would scarcely have seated himself to win a bare ten dollars if he had not thought that there was a possibility of something to learn. He had not paid much attention to her while he was in the company of Theodosia, but since her appearance at the Mint and her inquiries for the Short Sport he fancied pretty strongly that she was worth looking at.

"Luck furever!" said Miss Sally, when they had all filled their hands.

"I'm standin' pat, ef it don't skeer you all. Ef it duz I'll take one. Mebbe that'll lead yew on."

Sally held her cards in a bunch in her hands, and looked around reflectively.

"Don't ask us to play your game, madam," said Specter Sam.

"Considering the state of your finances I think the less you draw us on the longer your fun will last."

"Then I've got enough. What are you all doing?"

Did she or did she not know how to play draw? Probably she did, but Rivers and the rest intended to find out. The judge held the ace.

"One dollar," said the colonel, with a pleasant smile, pushing the coin to the center. "I tell you, judge, I've been after you for some time, and I feel it in my bones that I'm going to get you now. There's wealth afloat and I only hope Miss Rice will get her share of it."

One dollar more went Armadel; and the doctor followed with the regular raise.

"That makes my fortune just nine dollars more, ef the judge don't kin in, an' ther rest duz. I'll call yew all. Young man, give me the change."

Sally laid down a crisp, new, ten-dollar bill in front of the doctor, who gravely pushed over the change.

"But the judge does come in. I'm hunting you hard, colonel. Three dollars do I come in with, and there's still another raise of fifty cents."

"How do you expect us all to find the small change for a game like this? I don't observe the quarter up for ante, and there's not another fifty cents in the house. I'll see that and go two dollars better."

"Two better here!"

"Two better here!"

"Two better here!"

Miss Rice seemed carried away with the rapidity of the talk, and spoke before she thought, pushing her little capital up to the rest.

"I guess you've got us," said the judge, hesitatingly, running over his cards again.

"When Miss Rice puts up the balance of her bet," interposed Specter Sam. "She's a little short yet. Probably she didn't notice it."

"Oh, I'll buy her hand; or—we want to see it anyhow. Permit me."

The judge seemed well provided with small change, and threw down a two-and-a-half gold piece.

"Thank yew, young man. I'll pay you in a minnit."

"I hope so," responded Rivers, with a shrug of his shoulders. "But now that we've exhausted your finances we'll get down to business. Colonel, my hand's worth a hundred more, anyhow."

The colonel's nerve was good enough but his eyes sparkled just a little as he threw two notes on the table.

Specter Sam raised the pot another hundred, De France stayed out, and Sally, with a resigned look and her cards turned down, murmured:

"You're gittin' tew high fur me, an' I'll hev tew hold off fur a sight when yew big whales git through."

"Scarcely, aunty. You borrowed to raise; I guess, if I know anything about poker at the Mint, you'll have to borrow to come in."

"Oh, dear! Will yew lend?"

"And supposing you lose when do I get even, and supposing you hold over me what good will it do yours truly? You'll have to look outside."

"Outside goes," growled a hoarse, coarse voice.

"Hyar's coin to make it all good; an' hyar's a hoodle ter play 'em full all yer think it's wu'th. Go fur 'em, Sairey; an' hyar's ther Short Sport, frum Chicken Krick standin' at yer shoulder ter see fair play!"

CHAPTER XX.

SALLY CALLS, AND THE LIGHTS GO OUT.

"WHY, yew dod-rotted, short-legged, long-winded old sinner! Yew're thar, are yew? An' jist in time. I don't say these men war takin' an' ongentlemanly adventige ov a onperfected female; but they was playin' ov it mighty clost tew ther limit. I'll talk tew yew when ther fun's over. Now I'm all perfeshun. Let's see how yew're heeled."

Sally opened the wallet that had been plarked down at her elbow and gave one glance at its contents. Then she nodded all around, with a face as bright as the full moon.

"Three hundred to come in? Ov course I'll stay with yew. An' heap it up ever so fur besides. How's that? It's ther smallest he hez. Kiver it up, yew rustlers, er giunne ther pot."

Short and sharp were Miss Sally's words, and down on the table fluttered a thousand-dollar bill, her bright eyes flashing from one to the other as though she would read at a glance what each one was thinking.

Rivers answered with two more of the same kind. He had paid no apparent attention to the man who had so suddenly appeared to act as Miss Rice's banker; but on the lady herself he turned a quiet glance as he gave his last warning.

"I don't know, of course, and I don't guess, how good your hand may be; but pray remember that at the Mint it takes a fortune to carry a bluff through, and that when you come to the last of that little nest-egg there may be some trouble in finding a man to lend you fifty or fifty thousand on your say-so. You are just in that shape where, according to the rules recognized here, the longest pole takes the persimmons—the pot goes to the biggest purse."

"Then quit raisin'. Ef yew say so I'll take what's up an' jump ther game. Yew give me them cards, yew saw 'em shuffled, cut and dealt, yew bin a-watchin' me like a hawk ever sence. Mebbe ther's four ov ther biggest hands outen jail; an' mebbe two fives kin sweep ther board. Ef yew air goin' tew kick—kick now. Ef not, ther biggest cards er ther biggest pile takes ther pot—jist ez yew say—an' I ain't keerin' w'ich. I'm a lone wooman, with no one 'round but Bobby tew take my part; but I ain't tew be trod on, er trampled, kunnel; ef ther jedge don't want tew talk it's yewr next say-so."

An outburst of laughter brought a little more than the suspicion of a flush to Rivers's face; and that was something he had thought nothing on earth could do.

For this game had a good many interested spectators, and though the majority of them were men to whom the judge's words were pretty nearly law—and though the Short Sport was standing there with a dangerous scowl on his tough face—as Miss Rice snapped out her words the situation was so comical they would have laughed if they died for it.

Colonel Green was a man of nerve and a good poker-player. He also had a fair amount of floating wealth; but he knew that, as far as means went, Judge Rivers could swamp him, and make no great draft on his resources, either.

The laugh rattled him a little, and he gave another look at his cards, as though he didn't know to a spot what he held. He had a chance right there to call, and put an end to the hand; but the glance brought out every instinct of the true poker-player.

It was the first deal, and by all the doctrines of chance his hand in a heavy game was worth more than he had risked on it. It was not likely that everybody held good hands. Sally Rice was bluffing after feminine style, and the judge was most likely doing the same; but he thought they were both weakening a little, and one or the other would call on the next round, so he went just fifty dollars better.

Specter Sam laid his cards on the table, and gravely placed on top of them his derringer.

Then he rose and emptied his pockets. "I don't claim to be able to swim with you big fish, but I'm betting that I'll have a share in the pot according to the size of my investment. There's every dollar I have in the world—I've struck a mighty bad streak lately—and I think it just about raises the colonel a hundred."

Then he folled his arms and leaned back in his chair, leaving the cards in front of him held down by the derringer, and the balance of the players to fight it out among themselves. For the present, he had no other interest in the game. When the rest got through, he would have something to say.

Though he watched the other players keenly, he had an eye also to his surroundings, and noticed that there was something going on near the bar among those who, not having taken any particular interest in the game, had gathered there.

What it was about he could not form an idea, but there was some loud talking, and six or seven men seemed to be working up a racket in a quiet way, that was not attracting the attention of Paddy Milligan, who was interested in the big game, and stood at Doctor De France's shoulder.

Two men were out of the game, and Sally Rice and the judge each had a chance to talk before it would get around again to the colonel.

The lady had already made up her mind. Tightly clinched in her left hand she held a wad of notes; from them she drew, one at a time.

"One fur money, two fur show, three tew make ready an' four tew gol. Money talks! Count it up an' figger fur yourselves jist what it costs tew come in. This is a Jim-dandy game. Takes longer tew play a hand than it does tew build a house."

Four thousand dollars she laid down on the table, and the pile was by no means exhausted. If the notes all ran that high, there was more than a little fortune in Sarah's fingers.

"Cues and cases!" thought Specter Sam. "If Daisy Dan and his boys only suspected what a walking gold-mine that Short Sport is, wouldn't they have laid for him? And how is this thing going to end—who is this woman, and who is her brother? He has a mighty bad face, and from what I've heard dropped, he's as hard as they make 'em. Have to watch, and if a row begins, get my hands into the pot far enough to make me even. There's nerve enough in it, but hang me if I see exactly into Lucifer's little game!"

There were more than Sam Armadel puzzled, though the general opinion was that the judge after sitting down to a picnic wouldn't let go when he found he had caught a Tartar. Now it became a question whether he carried enough funds to keep the game going against such an unexpected Croesus.

Rivers did his best toward solving the problem.

From the pocket inside of his vest he drew out a wallet almost the duplicate of the Short Sport's,

and at the first glimpse the bystanders could see that it was well filled.

"You've got a fair capital there, but it don't do to run the risk of having you call me down. I'm sorry for you, colonel, but poker is poker, and one has to play it according to the size of his hand. Here are a few notes to build on, and while you're betting eyes on whether I've called the size of the figures I'll do a trifle of writing."

He counted over the notes, and then hastily scribbled a few lines with his stylographic pen.

"There! There's not as many whys, wherefores, and whereas as if a law-sharp had written it, but it will do as well. There's a bill of sale for the undivided half of the Red Rock Mine. You can take a jury of half a dozen disinterested experts to say how much that is worth if you think you can cover it and don't want to take my say-so for its value."

Rivers had solved the boodle-question in a way that no one had dreamed of.

What answer Sally Rice would make remained to be seen.

The value of the Red Rock was a question not easily solved. A dozen of the "experts" of Way Back—speaking from the limited knowledge they had of the Red Rock—would give a dozen different answers. None of them would have gone below ten thousand and some of the judge's admirers would have marked it up to half a million. To see that bet would set half the town by the ears.

There was a hush of expectation, Rivers leaning back in his chair, with the cold sneer deepened on his lips, watched the lady at his right.

But Sally Rice showed no sign of uneasiness. She had already counted out dollar for dollar the amount laid down by Eric Rivers, and now—

She leaned over with a singular smile on her face.

"Ef yew say, Jodge Rivers, money talks—an' nothin' else. Ef so I waz tew mind, yew couldn't be bluffin' me with yewr bills o' sales. Thar ain't a foot ov ground wu'th stickin' a shovel inter that ain't got a dozen titles a-layin' all over it an' 'round it. All exceptin' ther Red Rock. Yew've jist put up ther title tew one-half—an' it's jist ez good ez wheat. Thar's ther title tew ther other half—an' even yew won't deny it's genooine. I call yew, jedge: what yew got?"

In front of his face she opened out a legal-looking document. Holding it tightly in her right hand she with her left pointed first to the signature and then to the seals.

"It's thar—now what yew goin' tew do?"

Eric Rivers for the moment did nothing. He leaned back in his chair, his glittering eyes fixed upon the paper that Sally Rice showed him. In fact he was so much interested in the paper itself, that he did not note that she had not placed it on top of the other stakes, but had kept it nearer to her, so that a simple turn of the wrist would place it again in her hand. For the moment 'most any one would have sworn that he did not move, though Specter Sam knew better. There was just a slight move of his hand, unseen by any one save Armadel.

Then the voices at the bar grew louder, till they rose into a sudden roar, there was a crackling of pistol-shots, a yell as of several wounded men, the lights went out, the Mint was filled with sulphurous smoke, and in the thick darkness, there was a surge of many trampling feet toward the table where the little game had been going on.

CHAPTER XXI.

THEODOSIA BEGINS HER QUEST AT A BAD TIME.

THE two young ladies started as the voice came drifting in; stared at each other; and then Theodosia in some excitement exclaimed:

"It is Miss Vandeleur! She has not deserted us after all. Where are you? Where have you been? Come in, at once!"

But to this there was no answer, and though she hastened to the door to throw it open, there was no one in the narrow little hall, nor was there the sound of hurrying footsteps, though she had been certain that the interruption came from that direction.

"It was Miss Vandeleur," she said, with much positiveness.

"Probably there has been another stage in, and she has come on that; though I do not see why she should avoid us. I would see her at once."

"Perhaps, if she was listening to our conversation, she does not care to meet us. If I remember rightly, we were not altogether complimentary. Still, the sooner we come to an understanding with her the better. I see there is a bell. Suppose we call some one in and find out if she is really in the house."

Theodosia accepted the suggestion, and gave a hearty jerk—which, after a few moments of waiting, brought no response.

Miss Serena tried her hand then; and after her manner when she was in earnest, she went to work with an energy that might have roused the dead. Half a dozen times she jerked away at the cord, and the wonder was that it did not break off in her hands.

This time there was a response—somebody—

came down the passage with a hop, skip and a jump, and halting, knocked faintly at the door.

"Come in!" said Miss Lande sharply.

The door opened and Wau Wing stood on the threshold.

"Has the stage from Coronado come in this evening?" was the first question.

"Wau Wing no ear-hear stagee come this side from Colonado. What for you askee so fashion? Eh, ch'boy!"

"I am expecting a lady to arrive, and was almost sure that I heard her voice in the hall a moment ago. Do you know if there are any strange ladies in the house?"

The little Celestial shook his head.

"No-no. Missee too-muchee long. Him an' him flin an' w'at him callee Sallee Lincee—t'at allee stlange gill w'at arrivee. Tlee piecee alio girley man loom insidee Uly Done."

"But I certainly heard the voice of Miss Vandeleur in the hall a moment before I rung the bell."

"T'at no Missee Wandelulee; t'at Sally Lincee. Wau Wing sabbe t'at. Him look-see him chin-chin 'long sidee piecee door; then lun away. Me tinkee she go finlee him piecee butta. Him wantchee Wau Wing walkee long sidee. Him say, t'at he no can do. She finlee Shlot Spotlee she looksee Mint but Wau Wing no chippee. Him blotlee dlop Wau Wing on sightley supposey him see he. T'at alio plop? Eh, Ch'boy!"

"I think I understand. Wait there a moment."

She turned to her friend, speaking in a low tone.

"I think he means that it was Sally Rice whose voice we heard; and that she has gone to the Mint, to look for her brother. There is something strange about this. Suppose we go to the Mint too? Perhaps we can learn something. I have been so thoroughly awakened that to sleep would be impossible; and no doubt this heathen would act as our guide to the place. What do you say?"

"Drive on, my dear! You are of lawful age and legal understanding; and I am your friend till death. We are in for adventure and we may as well get through with it at first as at last. See what your Oriental has to say about the scheme."

Wau Wing for a time was obtuse; but when Theodosia, remembering that there was always a potency of explanation in one argument, produced a ten-dollar gold piece, which she held temptingly in her hand, his wits suddenly cleared.

"Hi-yah! T'at moch betta! Wau Wing unde'standlee t'at ebley timee. Him long sidee waillo, show missee Mintee chop-chop, him catches tin piecee dolla' maskee much galow."

He snapped his fingers in unison with his eyes, cut a pigeon-wing in the air, and then, beckoning over his shoulder, went scurrying out.

"Wait, wait!" called Theodosia.

"It will take us a few moments to get ready. We do not care to be recognized!"

"Allee lightey! Wau Wing he foah he levolver. T'en him be on shootee, allee samee 'Melican man. Gllit gittee leddy—Wau Wing he backside plenty galow."

And sure enough, by the time the young ladies were ready, the Chinaman came prancing back. His cue was done up under the cap that was set well back on his head; and in each hand he held one of the old-fashioned, six barrel revolvers, that were as liable to hit behind as a boomerang, and that no man with any brains ever used more than once. If he survived the operation he threw them away.

Wau Wing, however, seemed quite proud of his tools, which he flourished grandly, for a moment, and then thrust away somewhere out of sight under his cloak.

Very cautiously he led the ladies out of the Early Dawn, by the back door, and turned their steps toward the Mint.

There had been some time lost in the various conferences, so that Miss Sally had arrived, and was already taking part in the conversation between Sid Campton and the judge, when Wau Wing led them up to a window and pointed in through the raised sash.

"T'at Sally Lincee now. You hear-lo banje slike uppe supposey you nee-pee-ee-te-teng (listen). Supposey you go loom inside look se, you go knockee down. Bettie looksee from t'is sidee house. T'en you be fu'st chop—Wau Wing catches him tin piecee tolla."

The prudence of the Chinaman was acceptable to Miss Lande, though it brought them into a position which she by no means admired. By standing a little away from the window they could see without being seen—and she had a fair opportunity to listen to Miss Rice's voice, which certainly did not seem to be disguised, or in the least to resemble that of Millie Vandeleur.

At the same time she could get a glimpse of Way Back as it was after dark.

So she saw Sid Campton retire without any particular interest; heard Miss Sally's defiance; and saw, to her surprise, the challenge accepted and the little party seat themselves at the table, and the game begin.

The movement brought Sally still nearer. As Theodosia knew a little about the game—which,

in a mild form, was somewhat popular in fashionable circles—she could understand what was going on; and as the betting progressed she grew more and more interested.

The coming of the Short Sport was so quiet that the first knowledge she had of his presence was hearing his harsh voice, as he leaned over Sally's shoulder; but she recognized him on the instant, as the man for whom Miss Rice had been making inquiries.

He was a stoutly-built, squatty-looking man, with a long, bushy red beard, and a great shock of red hair sticking out from under his very broad-rimmed white hat.

His dress was not the average one of the first-class sport, nor of the miner, nor of the cowboy, nor of any particular class under the sun. His corduroy pantaloons were stuffed into the tops of a pair of rather fine boots, and he wore on his massive body a velvet shirt, gathered in at the waist under the waistband of his pantaloons, and buttoned at the wrists with three diamonds in each broad band, while a diamond, as large as the six combined, blazed at his throat in the knot of the heavy crimson and white silk kerchief that was twisted around his neck.

Around his waist was a broad web belt within which were stuck two heavy revolvers and a bowie, while from a pocket on either hip protruded the handle of a derringer.

In repose his sturdy form looked lower, perhaps, than it really was, and thus he had taken or gained the name of the Short Sport; but he moved with a light, stealthy step, that of itself would have marked him as a dangerous man.

"What a love of a desperado!" whispered Serena.

"So picturesque! And what untold wealth, to fling around for the sport of a woman! Oh, dear! Why haven't I such a brother?"

"Hush, you goose! They will hear you; and I want to see a little more of this; it is growing terribly exciting. And that red-headed villain would no doubt send a bullet out here without stopping to investigate who it might hit, if he happened to get wind of our presence."

"And what better do we deserve? You couldn't blame him, for he would know that he couldn't go far wrong winging an eavesdropper."

Serena had to have her fling; but once having vindicated her courage, she was as still as a mouse; and by and by unconsciously began to hold her breath. The shrewish, little, elderly woman they had loaned ten dollars to, was handling thousands and thousands. Was her brother a Croesus or a Rothschild?

And this play for the Red Rock Mine!

Both the young ladies noticed that, though the bills of sale were pushed toward the money in the center, they were not laid on it.

Then came the tumult, and the darkness; yet just before darkness seized the Mint, they saw two hands shooting out to grasp the papers.

"Steady, you thar!" shouted a voice that Theo recognized as belonging to the Short Sport.

"I've got two sixes out, an' ther men ez try ter tap this bank 'il go outen ther wet jist too quick. You all hear me whisper?"

Perhaps they did, but the uproar continued all the same, and the rush came straight for the table.

The two young ladies had plenty of courage.

Had they not possessed it they would never have been in such a situation. Even the prospect of the sight of a lively game of fisticuffs would not have driven them away.

This, however, was something more. All they could see was flash after flash, with the glimpse of a dimly-seen shadow or two. As a figure came darting out of the window, they turned and fled.

In their confusion they forgot or did not think of the way to the Early Dawn, and their feet carried them in exactly the opposite direction. They scurried on until they reached the limits of the camp. Then up in front sprang two men.

"Excuse our impudence, ladies," said one of them; "but I reckon ye'r pris'ners ag'in."

CHAPTER XXII.

A GRAND FIASCO.

THE warning of the Short Sport was well enough in its way, but he did something more than speak, and what he said was really intended as a blind. When he knew the rush was really coming that way, he added in a whisper:

"Keep cool, Sairy. Look arter ther stakes, and use yer revolvers ef yer can't do no better."

With one light spring he landed upon the table; with another he bounded clear over the head of Specter Sam, alighting on the floor beyond.

In the black night, that shot down on them when the lights went out, he could not tell one man from another, but this movement seemed to put everybody in front of him except those who had been interested in the game. If any one else got back it was their own lookout.

As soon as he got this position, and when the surging wave was nigh to them, he began to let both hands go.

It was not so easy to tell just how to plant his blows, but he got them in with artistic skill. Half a dozen times this fist or that shot out, fol-

lowed each time by a dull thud, and a heavy stumble.

Yet one man, without even a little gleam of light by which to direct his efforts, could not in such a way stop such a rush. If he had opened with both revolvers he might have turned it the other way, but when he dropped one the rest still came on; while, in the darkness it was no safe game to play fer keeps fer even the best-known gentleman in Way Back, let alone for a comparative stranger.

And how the jam surged around him, and invaded the corner in which the table had been sitting; the judge's voice rung through the room, backed up by Colonel Green and the rest of them, save Sally Rice. She, by instinct or something else, whirled her chair around, so that it fell lengthways on the floor, and almost at the same time sprang backward, crouching in the corner of the walls, and close to the window.

There was a tremendous crash as a struggling knot of men went stumbling over the chair, striking the ground with mighty force; and Sally saw a couple forms shoot out of the window, as though propelled from a catapult, a second or two before a dim light appeared at the bar, and then a rapid illumination all over the room. The light was not as clear as it had been; but enough lamps and lanterns were lit to bring out the scene tolerably clearly.

Paddy Milligan was lying off by himself, and as quiet as a corpse. He had a hard head, and was supposed to be a very glutton for punishment, but some one had knocked him out with one blow.

Half a dozen men were disentangling themselves from the living heap they had made on the floor; three or four others were hanging around in a half-comatose condition, remarkably good specimens of the Short Sport's handiwork; and back further toward the bar were several that had been dropped out earlier in the game.

And on the very spot where it had been, but turned upside down, with Specter Sam standing on the bottom side of the top, was the table over which the poker party had been playing one of the biggest games Way Back had seen.

The sport wasn't saying much, but he was cool and watchful, and he had his pistols out.

"Easy, gents!" he now remarked. "There's no sleepers to be had fer the picking up. Fingers ain't free, just in the epoch of time, and the first one I see reaching fer the pot, off it goes! Take it steady, lady and gentlemen! I think you will find the butt end of the pot under the table, about where I'm standing on it."

"Hold it there, then," said the judge, with one downward glance to see that Armadel had made no mistake in his deft movement to save the funds.

"And we'll know what the meaning of this is, if we have to hang half the camp to get at the truth."

"Thar ain't much ter git at," growled Bobby Rice.

"With all that wealth in sight, the gang jest got wild an' went fur it. Kiver 'em, you, an' we'll see what ropes are good fur. Hyar, you wall-eyed, sore-backed, broken-legged, comb-cut bush-whackers! Yer thought you'd kerrel that coin, did yer? We hev yer whar ther har's short, an' we'll keep yer thar tell we git ropes ter go round, you throat-cuttin', gold-grabbin', hoss-thievin' sluice-robbers!"

"Robbers nothin'!" said one of the men, who had staggered up from the floor, and did not seem at all alarmed at the revolvers that were waiting for him.

"Hold yer trap, will yer? We're after Jimmy Dale an' his pard, an' ef we git onto 'em thar may be some hangin', but we won't be at ther lower end ov ther rope. Oh, blazes! While you're a-chinnin' hyar they've skipped. Who's ther pards, say I? There's a mob ov 'em. Maybe you're one ov 'em, Ef so—"

"Hold on right there, Jack Stevens," interrupted the judge. "You're a good little man, and we know that all 'round; but you're getting more bitten off than you can chew. I begin to think that perhaps you weren't after us—and the pot lays there, probably safe enough—but you've robbed somebody of more money than your infernal little Dew Drop ever put out. The hands are all bunched, and I reckon of course they will have to be played over. Tell the story straight and very short, and we'll see whether there is any reason for us to let up on you. I tell you there's some of you eternal idiots that's in a heap of danger."

"Yew bet they air!" added Sally Rice, sliding forward, and shaking her fist at surly Stevens. "I hed my hand layin' on ther table while I counted out my stakes. Whar be it now? An' I with four big aces an' a sure think!"

"If you held aces you had a noble hand, and I guess you'll find them somewhere about under my boot-heels, along with the balance of the deck. As the rest are in the same fix I don't think there's much need to howl. This deal is busted; draw out your capital, every man-jack of you, and take a fresh start."

"A moment, Sam. Let's hear Stevens's story before we figure up the damages. We may be able to stand the losses better."

Very much in earnest was the judge, as he stepped in between the speakers, and facing the Short Sport rather than Johnny.

"It ain't much of a story. Jimmy Dale, from Hard Luck—ther man who got away with my pard, broke him all up an' lifted his hair—war in town. It war bloody murder ef ever ther' war one, and we got ter throwin' it up ter him. I don't say ez we wa'n't tollerby sharp set. When he tried ter crawfish we started ter go fur him an' his pards, an' thet jist tells ther hull story. Ef yer wants ter shoot on that, shoot; but you bet we'll be doin' suthin' while you're at work."

"And you're been making all this racket trying to get away with one man—a dozen of you?"

"We war tryin' ter take him in fur a hemp tea-party, an' him an' his pard wa'n't comin' wuth a cent. They're gone now, an' the devil go with 'em. They've half-way ter nowhar, an' you kin gamble they'll never kim back ag'in. Ef we've bin puttin' a spoon in your mush I'm dog-goned sorry, but you know how it it yerself. Ther hull crowd hearn what war said; an' Way Back 'll stand behind ther men ez goes fur a hoss-thief an' a throat-cutter."

Stevens was cool as a cucumber—it was a time when a man had to be cool or gounder. While he spoke his eyes were roving around, keeping a sharp lookout for the danger that might come from almost any side. Of course what had been done was enough cause for a dozen rows; but then it seemed to have all been done for a good purpose; and it might pass now, after the investigation had begun. A little sooner and everybody would have looked for an explanation at the muzzle of the pistol.

"Your story is reasonable enough, but it's rough on us. There's something else to be looked after here before we can tell exactly what harm was done. Stand back all of you, while we hunt the matter up and see how much of the pool Mr. Armadel has corralled."

Every one was watching the judge. In a crowd of old gamblers like these there would not be much breath wasted till the time came; and Rivers was the best man to deal with the outsiders.

"Good enough," said Sam, as cool as the rest. "But what I want to know is how this pot is going to be divided."

"Thar ain't ary divide—I reckon Sally takes ther hull cake."

The squat figure of the Short Sport moved forward, and he looked around as though he meant all he said, and a good deal more.

"There's no one more anxious to give a lady a fair show," said Sam, "but I'm not caring to go dead broke when I held cards for a fortune. If everybody holds their hands, and the deck-head adds up all right, we might show around. I have a sight."

"We might," answered the judge, with a sneer. "You have your hand all right, have you?"

"Hades, no!"

Armadel looked hastily down.

"I only grabbed my derringers, and then I turned the table. It seemed to me that you were all standing right in along with me. By the holy camel! It's mixed in the deck."

"And I'll swear," added the judge, "that in the dark some one twitched the cards right out of my hand."

From under the top of the table the corners of some of the spotted pasteboards were peeping—others were scattered around on the floor.

"An' I've on'y got four!" shrieked Miss Rice. "Somebody's bin a-robbin' me!"

"It strikes me, you're all in about the same fix."

Doctor De France having passed out at an early stage could afford to be cool.

"It's the biggest fizzle of a large game that I remember striking, but the only thing I see is to divide the pot, as Armadel suggested."

"But how yer goin' ter divide it?" howled the Short Sport.

"Who gits your money, an' how fur does that galoot's sight kerry him? Thar's enuf p'int's risin' ter shoot half a town."

"See here, Mister Rice," interposed the judge, "I haven't the pleasure of a very close acquaintance with you, and I don't want to be abrupt; but I'd call your attention to the fact that you're not playin' in this game at all. If the lady has anything to say, we shall be pleased to hear from her. If you have any remarks to make I'll be happy to listen to them after this thing is settled."

"That's good enuf. I'll let Sally do her own say-so, an' see you later. That's squar'. Jest d'vide ther shekels in ther pot an' give every man his own ante, ef yer say so. When you an' me gits through talkin' ther heft ov it'll be thar. Turn up ther table an' rake out the spelter."

He slapped his pocket as he spoke, but he looked at Rivers with a wicked glare that might have made the cold chills run down and up the back of a nervous man, though it hardly affected the judge. He had his own idea of how the conversation would be carried on.

Still it is more than likely—though Armadel raised the table, revealing the notes, which he placed in a heap as they had been—that there

would have been more to say about this proposed compromise had it not been for a sudden diversion.

In headlong haste a Chinaman rushed in—it was Wau Wing, of the Early Dawn.

"Wha's Judge Livee? Klick! Man-man! Chop-chop. Belle bad pigin tellee he. Him no hear-lo klick him maskee allo t'ing howlee."

"What's the matter now?" said Rivers, glancing a trifle anxiously at the Celestial.

"Here I am, Wau Wing; what the Hades do you want?"

"Lobber mans catchee glil ag'in, two piecee timee. You no hully load-agent lun away—takee girley—maskee pay heapsee foi tolla. You sabbe? Hully; klick!"

The judge uttered an oath, which was echoed by one from the Short Sport as he sprung at the Chinaman and caught him by the throat.

CHAPTER XXIII.

WAY BACK TO THE RESCUE.

THE announcement of the Chinaman created any quantity of excitement in the Mint; but most of all with the little party that were having such a heap of trouble over the interrupted game of draw.

The latter had been keeping sharp eyes out for fears of a movement from the outsiders; for some of the innocent ones had received rather rough handling in the dark, without knowing exactly who to blame it on, and Paddy Milligan had just got to his feet and his senses, too mad to swear, and was looking around to see what had happened to him.

As the Short Sport seized Wau Wing, Specter Sam made a temporary solution of the poker question. He caught from Milligan's hands the hat he was just picking up from the floor, and into it raked the money on the table.

"Here, Milligan, stick this into your safe and hold on to it till we all get together again and straighten it out. We haven't time to fool over it now—but I want you all to notice that I held four queens. There they lie, on the top of the deck head. You can take them along as Sam Armadel's share in the dog-gondest picnic he was ever in. Enough chips knocked off to send all Way Back to purgatory, and not a soul killed. Now you, there, stranger, go slow on the heathen! We want to hear his story before you shut off his wind."

"Slow goes; but I'm a-watchin' him, an' ef he tries ary lies—off goes his brain-box. Spit it out! Where was ther young ladies? who took 'em? wich way did they go? Say it slow an' say it true."

The rough handling had the effect of calming Wau Wing's enthusiasm; if it had been any one else but the Short Sport it might have made him too sulky to speak.

But he seemed to stand in holy awe of Bobby Rice, who, when he got to the front, shut off the attempted questioning by the others with a wave of his hand—and the hand held a revolver.

It is not worth while to follow the exact wording of Wau Wing's pigeon English, as he answered these leading questions. Enough that he explained that, in consideration of ten dollars to be paid, he had guided the two young ladies to the Mint, and led them to a window where they could obtain a glance within. They watched the proceedings for some time, while he prudently took a place in the background. When the rioting began they became suddenly alarmed and beat a hasty retreat. The appearance of several men, leaping through the window, caused him to draw back again. As soon as they had gone a few yards he followed after the ladies, but they had obtained such a start that he did not overtake them. He gained on them, however, and near the edge of the camp saw them picked up by two men, and carried away.

At that he hurried back to the Mint to inform Judge Rivers, who, he understood, had an interest in them. The men were on foot, but might have had horses concealed somewhere near. He did not stop to see.

"Hoop-la, that's enuf!" shouted the Short Sport. "Go ter bed, Sally; I'll see yer in ther morning. Ther ez wants ter take ther trail kin foller. I kin track a grasshopper through ther mountains, er a woodtick through ther canebrake. Gimme a starter an' I'll hev 'em er bust a wheel. Bring a rope 'long, somebody. I'll bet high thar'll be a hangin' here afore we git back!"

Without waiting to see who followed, or what became of Miss Rice, he darted out of the door, and, with a yell of encouragement, a dozen or more men struck in behind him. If Judge Rivers and Sam Armadel were not of the number, it was because they had stolen a march and gone on ahead. They just waited long enough to hear where the scene of the abduction was, and then dropped quietly out of the window.

"Whose game is this?" queried Specter Sam, as they stole away. "Has Daisy Dan been playing you dirt?"

"I'll never tell till I get there, whose picnic it is; but I'll take my oath it's not the Daisy's. He's had all the dip into the treasury that he asked for, and he knows better than to try to play roots on yours truly. It's some outsider that has heard the story and taken the notion that

it's a blamed easy way to earn money. Hist! I think I hear footsteps."

Footsteps they certainly did hear, though they were light ones; and as they stopped to listen they heard a whispering.

"Blazes!" exclaimed Sam. "Here they are now!"

Sure enough, with some hesitation a pair of female figures approached.

"There is no danger, ladies!" called out the judge, intending to reassure them.

"We heard of your mishap, and were coming to your assistance as fast as limbs could carry us. What was the trouble, and how did you get away?"

"Oh!" responded the voice of Theodosia.

"It is you, is it? How happy I am to see you advancing to the rescue!"

"Yes, judge, for a couple of minutes we were afraid that we had the financial programme to arrange all over again. What is the matter with Way Back? I should say that the people around here are ravenously hungry, and rise en masse to pick the bones of venturesome strangers. I wonder if Theodosia don't feel half devoured already. Take us home. We are the most thoroughly cured of all desire to wander, of any people you ever heard of."

"And am I to receive no credit for arriving on the same train?"

Specter Sam's tone was an injured one, as Miss Serena's was a jestful one, and the lady laughed as she answered:

"The judge has asked two questions and you a third. Which do you want me to answer first? And while you are deciding on that pray be leading us to the hospitable roof of the Early Dawn. Oh, dear! I never thought that a living mortal could yearn for its portals."

"We will give you a sight in a moment—the sooner the better. I have no doubt half the camp will be here in no time, and I am sure that you don't want to stretch your confidences. Begin at the beginning and just go right along with the story. Your adventures beat a novel."

While these two chattered Judge Rivers was giving a few words of reproof to Miss Lande.

"How could you? Way Back has its chivalry, and all that; but such a midnight adventure will go far toward bringing disgrace upon our town, in your eyes at least. I pray explain."

"There's precious little to explain," laughed Serena.

"Theo thought that at a saloon like the Mint, if anywhere, she would be likely to find information in regard to that long-lost brother."

"We looked at the notables gathered there, taking an outside view of the land before proceeding to pitch our tabernacles, and what we saw hardly strengthened our desire to enter. I think we would have taken one look and then departed, if we had not been interested in the game of cards that was begun right under our noses. We were so absorbed in it that we did not notice the storm brewing beyond until it broke. When it began to thunder and lighten we hid our heads in our shawls and ran away."

"You never thought of your guide, I suppose?"

"The Chinaman? Oh, dear, no. He did not seem to be fierce enough as a fighter to be worth much as an escort in such an emergency. We simply forgot him, and trusted to our own resources."

"When we reached the end of the city, and discovered that we had lost our way, two of your estimable citizens—I suppose they belonged here, of course—to us appeared, saying that we were their prisoners."

"That sounded comfortable. 'Men must work and women must weep,' you know; and it only seemed an invitation to return to our normal condition. I think we would have gone along without hesitation—I know that we had started—when Providence raised up a preserver. I am not sure but that he was more frightened than we were; still, he served the purpose very well, and it's ungrateful to speak evil of the bridge that carries you over."

"And this preserver—what did he do?"

"He simply rose up in the path and remarked, 'Wh-wh-what's g-g-goin' on hyer?' He may have had a revolver in each hand; but that didn't count. Our two villains dropped us and took to their heels. Then our friend looked at us and we looked at him, and we all of us looked at each other. Seeing he had nothing to say, we inquired the way to the Early Dawn. He pointed and said we should 'G-g-go d d-down' this way till we came to it."

"He did not offer to go with us, so we left him standing there and came on by ourselves."

"Of course you recognized the young man? His voice sounded familiar?"

"Very familiar, since it was the young man who was with us in our excursion to the fair of the Daisies. He did not seem quite so ready with his revolvers; but his voice was sufficient. When our assailants heard it they were paralyzed."

"You were certain you recognized the voice?" asked the judge.

"Very certain. There is none other like it in the round world. When I get time I shall bring the owner before me and enjoy hearing it at my leisure. It is better than the opera. Ah! I did

not think I should ever enjoy seeing this blessed old caravansera. And when we wander again by moonlight it will be with a better escort than the gentle Wau Wing."

"Whom, as I understand, you owe 'tin tolla.' I shall not scold you, but suggest that at any time you will find Mr. Armadel or myself at your service when you wish to make an excursion. And, by the way, it is possible that I may have a trifle of information for you to-morrow—nothing much to hope for, but a straw that may give some little indication of the drift of the wind. We shall not detain you. If you notice, the troops are maneuvering in the distance and we shall go and inform them that the enemy has evacuated. Good-night!"

Very little fuss did the gentlemen make over the adventure, and the ladies tried to appear just as cool, though when once more they found themselves in their room they looked at each other nervously, and were inclined to talk very solemnly.

"Serena, dear?"

"Yes, Theo."

"I am inclined to think that this is a wild-goose chase."

"Yes, dear."

"And the geese are ourselves."

"I shouldn't wonder."

CHAPTER XXIV.

PADDY MILLIGAN LOCKS HIS CHEST.

PRECEDED by Wau Wing the late inmates of the Mint went rushing down the street, and were soon at the spot where the two villains had attacked the ladies.

With many gestures and jabbering the Chinaman pointed it out, as also the direction they were taking in their retreat. Without delay a couple dozen men began searching for a trail; some following the road, while others beat the adjoining country.

Ten minutes later, perhaps, Rivers and Armadel came strolling along to impart the information that the ladies were safe.

A chorus of yells was raised that brought in those who had already got some distance from the spot; and amid much loud talk the crowd retraced its steps.

The Short Sport, however, was not one of the party; nor had he been seen on the ground.

The reason for that was ample sufficient, if the rest had only known it. In the outset he had distanced the throng, and had come upon a man, who rested unresponsively in his sudden grip.

It was the veritable Uriah, who managed, with much less than the usual amount of stut-tering to let him know that the ladies had made their escape; and were on their way back to the hotel.

Waiting to hear nothing more the sport hurried away again, until he caught sight of the little party of four, watching them until they reached the Early Dawn. Then he turned, and in a moment was lost to sight among the shadows of the cabins.

His disappearance that night excited no remark; but when he did not turn up the next morning there was considerable speculation, especially when it was known that the Early Dawn was short one of its guests, in the person of Miss Sally Rice. Most likely some sort of foul play would have been suspected had it not been for a little note received by Paddy Milligan, which read:

"The stakes in that game last evening were left in your hands to be retained until we could all get together again and decide where they belonged. Business calls me, (and my long-lost brother) away, for perhaps a week. Hold on to the money until we return. I might add, I have the bill of sale for the half of the Red Rock and Judge Rivers his for the other half. Yours, SALLY RICE."

It was written in a delicate sort of hand, and worded decidedly more artistically than one would have expected from the sharp little spinster, but there was no reason for doubting its authenticity.

"Oi have ther coin, d'yez moinde now?" said Milligan.

"An' its a squar'man Oi am now, by ther same token; an' sure enough Oi'm holdin' on tell it, fast an' harrud, until they kim to take it. Thin we'll see whose it is be roights, er whether its anyboddie's at all, at all. Mebbe ther short man is so bad skeered he's joomped the town."

That was the explanation that seemed most plausible to the majority of those who discussed the subject, though there were a few who declared they had heard him say that he had urgent business calling him down to the lower country. Eric Rivers heard the explanations and speculations as he heard Milligan's decision in silence. When he was crowded a little for his opinion he gave them briefly.

"The Short Sport is about as bad a man as ever struck the camp, but that's no reason why we shouldn't give him a fair show for his money. He didn't sit down to the game, but when we let him come in as a backer we as good as promised him that there should be no gouging. The different interruptions were very unfortunate, though we can't blame him for them; and it was not his say-so that put the

money in Paddy's hand. It's there now, and I guess it will have to stay for a week or so anyhow, if he don't turn up sooner. I don't need it, and if the rest don't kick I sha'n't raise a howl. It's asking a good deal of Milligan, though."

That settled the question, and the interest in the big game was temporarily suspended, as far as the outsiders were concerned. When Specter Sam privately asked what in Hades he meant he got an inside view.

"I'd have that wealth if I had to get a gang and storm the Mint were it not for one thing. As long as it's there the trap is already baited—when the Short Sport comes back it will be sprung. You can draw on me for the amount locked up if you need it. I'd sooner pay twice the amount than miss a shy at the infernal tough."

"You think he will come back?"

"It stands to reason. No man is going to let go of that amount of money as long as there is a chance to hold on; and I'm spreading it through the neighboring camps that the money is here waiting for him to show up."

"And when he comes?"

Rivers frowned; and then smiled.

"I don't profess to understand how it is, but he carries the title to the other half of the Red Rock. I've spent a few thousands trying to locate it, and now that I have it fixed you can gamble on it that I don't let up until it changes hands. I tell you, when they answered up to my bluff in that way I was so dumfounded that I could not say a word."

"But don't it strike you, just a little faintly, that all that is as broad as it is long? The Short Sport don't seem just the most innocent little cuss in the world, and if he hasn't a game of some kind on hand you can take my straps. Keep an eye out for him, or you may come out about where you want to get him."

"My eyes are open; and so are those of some more. I'm not afraid to tell you that he's booked at the office for a first-class through over the range."

"Ahem! Along with Pinnacle Pete? But I notice both of them keep themselves mighty scarce. If they're not fly to your little game call me a Dutchman."

"Perhaps; but they'll both find Eric Rivers a hard man to deal with."

"And the woman?"

"Don't worry if she never comes back. She's in the same boat, and will be looked after first of all. If Wau Wing never sees her again so much the better."

It was pretty certain that the judge did not intend to kill Specter Sam with over-confidence. So far there had been little but hints as to the future, without much information in regard to ways and means—and Sam asked no question, but watched the run of the game with quiet keenness.

The judge had promised Theodosia some information; but when morning came there was a note from him, saying that the man whom he had expected to question had disappeared, and that he was looking for him. It might take a day or so to find him.

That was a very good plan to make the young ladies anxious to see him; and when he came that evening he was very cordially received.

"I hope your success has been greater than ours," was Miss Lande's greeting.

"We have been making some inquiries to-day, and had Mr. Patterson up for cross-examination, but have not elicited a spark of information. Our reliance now is on you."

"And I fear I am but a broken reed. I have allowed the man I spoke of to slip through my fingers; though he was so drunk that he did not look as though he would be able to travel for a week."

"But what *did* he say; or why was it that you suspected he could give us any information?"

"He was an old-timer here, who floated around all the camps, and though worthless for anything else had his value as a walking biographical dictionary. My attention was attracted by hearing him telling several yarns in regard to the tenderfoot he had seen a dozen years ago. I found he had been lying around the town for some days, living on his cheek, and that there was no question but what he was really an old-timer."

"I had a little conversation with him, but I was due at the Mint, and I judged that he would talk more to the point if I could get him started in the morning; just then he was entirely too drunk to keep anywhere near to the line. I made an appointment for him to breakfast with me, and promised a proper portion of the 'oh, be joyful.' To make assurance doubly sure, I put one of my men to watch him. Bless your soul! My man was dead drunk by daybreak, and Uncle Davy had disappeared. He may have started on for the next camp, or he may be only lying around in the bushes, drunk. I have three or four men on the search, and will have him if we have to follow him into the Gulf of Mexico."

"Oh, dear! Did you consider that to be a hopeful find?"

"Very. So far, we have little to go on. A

boy was at Walnut Bar a dozen years ago. There were probably dozens of other boys. What we want to do is to identify ours. Then we can, perhaps, follow him up. Of course, it is more than likely that we shall have to visit the Bar; but if we can procure in advance any information, it will make our way all the plainer when we get there."

"But we do not want to put you to all this trouble. It is monstrous!" exclaimed Theodosia. "We should employ a detective—in fact, I would have had one with me had he not failed me. He was to meet us at Coronado. Your time is too valuable to waste following such a blind trail."

"The more valuable it is the more reason why I should put it only to the best of uses. Do not anticipate. Let me see what I can find out for you at Way Back. When that lead is exhausted—give me a couple of days, please, to search the camp and find Uncle Davy—we will discuss a prospecting trip in a new district."

After that the judge was very agreeable for a few moments, and after offering his services at any time as escort around the town, and inviting them to visit the Red Rock, he took his departure.

"So far," sighed Theo, "I have accomplished nothing—unless to satisfy myself that I knew less than I thought."

"Nothing more," sighed Serena, in homesick unison.

"Nevertheless, I will not give up the search."

"No, we will not give it up until we have interviewed every road-agent and every drunken old vagabond this side of the Rockies. And the crop is so large."

A little of this kind of conversation went a great way. They were beginning to feel more hopeless than discouraged, when there was a knock at the door.

Wau Wing was there—and somewhat mysterious.

"Once piecee man wantchee hap see girley. Once piecee ha'd caseel! Once piecee drunken bummell! Once belley bad man! Once piecee Unkel Davy!"

The young ladies looked at each other.

"The man that Judge Rivers spoke of! Another attack on our pocketbook!"

"Of course; but we must see him."

"Certainly. Show him in, Wau Wing, and bring your revolvers. Your courage is not much to speak of, but it may be as well to have a witness to the interview, and you will do as well as a better man."

"You bettee. Wau Wing be alle lounde. Mayhap he catchee 'nothe piecee tin tolla. Eh, ch'hoy?"

And he skipped out to bring in Uncle Davy.

CHAPTER XXV.

UNCLE DAVY GETS DOWN TO BED ROCK.

MISS THEODOSIA had seen some hard-looking cases and some disreputable-looking bummers in her brief sojourn in the West; but this fellow went beyond them all. He was dirty, ragged, and bloated, and he looked at her with a vicious grimace that made the cold chills run down her back. Then, by way of preparation, he extracted an enormous chew of tobacco from his capacious mouth, and tossed it back into the hall, where it fell with a resounding spat. He also blew his nose with what looked to be a quarter section of a discarded and unclean table-cloth, and having partially returned it to his hip-pocket, extended his right arm and gave a twack on his breast with his left fist.

"Which thor same are Unkel Davy, ov 'forty-nine!"

Miss Theo regarded him calmly. Serena looked at him as a curiosity indigenous to the soil, and worthy of attentive study.

"Forty-nine! Where is that?" inquired Theo, at the same time pushing the stove-box, that served as a wash-stand, between them, ostentatiously placing upon it a bright, nickel-plated revolver, while at a motion Wau Wing sidled forward, and squatting in the window, produced his pepper-boxes with a grin.

"Whar are it? Ax ther past. Gone. Swallowed up like a last year's spring chicken in a second-class hash-house. Gone ter bed. Defunct. Played. Dead. Ewaporated. A-roost-in' with the angels. But I war thar then; an' I'm hyer now. I knowed 'em all, man er boy, an' fur rocks there ain't none ov 'em I can't read yer ther pedigree. Ef yer don't b'lieve me, try it on."

"I don't suppose that you are a lunatic, nor that you have intruded here without a purpose, but I confess I can't quite catch your meaning. If you cannot explain it a little more clearly I shall be happy to bid you good-evening."

The bummer winked sbrewdly, and placed one very dirty finger alongside of his blooming nose.

"Yer don't ketch on, eh? An' you a-buntin' Unkel Davy all day 'round ther town! Now yer see him; an' now yer don't see him. Ketch er weasel sleepin', will yer? Find Unkel Davy when he's layin' low? But ef yer byar f'r infurnashun, an' ef yer have coin 'cordin' ter its vally, jest turn ther crank an' I'll grind it out by the quart. Ax me sum queshuns an' see ef I ain't fly."

He extended a smudgy paw, and worked the stumpy-looking fingers suggestively. When Miss Theo placed a ten-dollar bill within their reach they closed with a greedy clutch. He inspected the bit of paper carefully, thrust it away in his pocket, and then bowed so low that his battered old hat almost touched the floor.

"I knowed it. We kin do bizzness clean up to ther hub. That's a elegant starter, an' when I gets ten, er eight, er a couple dozen more on 'em, I'll be talkin' like a house afire. Reel out yer queshuns now, an' I'll give yer a sample."

Had it not been for the importance attached to this man by Judge Rivers he would scarcely have obtained a hearing. He might deceive her now, but she intended to hear what he had to say, and put the judge on his track afterward.

"I do not understand how you heard of me; but I am in search of information, and am willing to pay very liberally for it, provided it tells me more than I know already."

"Set yer game an' Unkel Davy are ready ter chip. Ef he don't hold a flush royal you kin hev ther pot."

"I am in search of one Rolland Lande, who came West as a boy a dozen years ago. I know that he was at Walnut Bar; I think that he was afterward at Hard Luck. Did you ever meet him, and do you know anything about him now?"

The bummer chuckled over the question, as though it was highly amusing.

"Lawd love yer, han'sum miss, thar war a dozen boys; but I dunno ez any ov 'em ans'ered ter that name. F'r instans, thar war Fightin' Fred, Tough Tommy, Billy ther Brick, Owl-Eye Sam—oh, thar war lots an' gobs ov boys, an' none ov 'em kin ter a good end. Mostly hung, they war. But Rolland Lande—I don't jist 'member; but I don't reckon thar war any sich duck ez those. What war he like? Mebbe I kin hit him yit."

Briefly Theodosia sketched her brother as she remembered him; Uncle Davy listening with close attention.

"Walnut Bar!" he mumbled reflectively, his finger again on his nose.

"I war thar, that's a fact. Why, why, why—dog-gone it! Thar war jist sech a youngster thar with Judge Rivers—he wa'n't no judge then, all ther same. Ef he can't tell yer all erbout it thar ain't no use ter be axin' queshuns ov noboddy else. You sure he knowed what you war arter? Stick a pin thar."

"Very sure," answered Theo.

"Then he didn't want ter talk—an' I reckon I don't blame him. He kin tell yer more 'bout him than ary other two-legged clam ez ever 'zisted. Him an' his pards. Ef one won't talk mebbe 'nother 'un 'll squeal."

"You're trying to conceal something now, or else you are badly lying," said Theo., showing her disgust.

"Hope m' die! S'elp me Bob! Now I lays me! Et-set-her-up! I'm right down on ther kid more aca'se ov bein' at Bad Luck when ther last round kin off. Oh, he's a bad man, are that same judge; an' I ain't wantin' him ter freeze onter me. Not fur ther fust chance, no-how. But I kin tell you ther hull truth now; an' arterwards, don't yer see, I kin tell you any dog-gone thing he wants me to, an' you'll know I'm lyin'. Sabbe?"

"I can't say that I do."

"Why, ef I didn't lay it off jist ez he tole me—zip! Pore ole Davy goes outen ther wet! An' I wouldn't go back on you—nary time. Stick a pin thar, an' tie er knot."

"Very well. Tell me the truth."

"Fur rocks?"

"Old gentleman, you seem to be making an effort to get double pay. It won't work. Tell me what you choose. When Judge Rivers—in whom I have every confidence—continues the investigation he will hand you what the information is worth."

Uncle Davy gave a sigh that sounded like the snort of an asthmatic steam boiler.

"Good enough. You drives a hard barg'in; but I've cottoned to yer, an' I'll do ther best I kin. Lemme see."

"Ez fur ez Walnut Bar goes thar ain't much ter tell. This hyar kid ez I war speakin' ov kin in purty nigh ter played out. He hed bin down south'ard 'ith Joe Eastman an' his party—a-drivin' ther hosses, fur ther durned—ex-kwuz me, miss—gerloots hed a waggin in ther outfit, an' picked up ther cub ter drive. They all hed ther ba'r cut fur nothin' 'ceptin' Soft Jimmy—which war this kid. When ther 'Pash kerrelled ther outfit he hid under a cactus, an' ez ther Injuns didn't think he war a blame fool they didn't look fur him thar."

"He war so nigh ter starvin' thet his shadder war actooally knowed ter hunt him all 'round camp ter freeze onter him ag'in when ther sun come out frum onder a cloud; an' didn't more ner hafe know him when it found him."

"Rivers war thar then, runnin' a faro lay-out, an' he chucked ther youngster a cracker er a bone now an' then, an' mebbe kept him frum starvin'. I dunno. Ther boy sed so. Ef they'd 'a' think, thar war more ez would 'a' did it. Ef I hed 'a' knowed—w'y Unkel Davy war then rollin' in wealth! It would 'a' took five oughts ter figger his pile, an' a healthy good figger be-front ov 'em."

"But we warn't payin' no 'tenshun ter ther kid, tho' he fatten'd up kinder s'prisin'-like, an' one day he left on one ov Ab Johnson's pack-mules, an' that's ther last ever see'd ov him at Walnut Bar."

In spite of themselves the young ladies were becoming interested in the revelations of the vagabond. His manner and appearance did not seem half so offensive. Moreover, there was an indescribable air of truth about him, when he began to rehearse his story, that won upon them as he went along.

"And so, by your own showing, the judge was kind to the boy? I could have imagined it, knowing what he has done for us."

"Jest wait, will yer? I ain't done yit. Stick a pin thar an' tie a knot."

"Ez ther years went trottin' along, Unkel Davy met with reverses. They left ther good ole ways ov straight poker, an' more an' more they played draw. They put more an' more p'izen inter ther mount'in jew, ontill they hed ter hev it in flint glass, 'cause or'nary glass wouldn't hole it. Washin's war played out, an' men ez made o'ny day's wages wa'n't wuth ther pickin'. I bekim a object."

"But I continnered ter travel; an' I see'd a heap more ner I used ter, 'cause no one didn't take no 'count ov Unkel Davy. An' what I see I don't disremember. Stick a pin thar an' tie er knot."

"I see'd Rivers—leastwise ther man ez passes fur sich—several times; an' last I struck him at Hard Luck. He war running faro in town, an' playin' ther game ov hands-up out ov town. Three er four pards he hed, an' they war ail jist ez bad ez they make 'em."

"What? This Judge Rivers?"

"Ther identicklo same. But, ez I war sayin', they war on ther make—ez they allers hed bin. An' this same beetle tenderfoot war thar too."

"Now, jist how it all war I can't perzackly say, but it war somehow this hyar way: He'd growed, but he wa'n't only a boy yit, an' bein' all orlone, an' seein' Rivers, which, by ther way, he'd allus had another han'le for his name, he friz onter him ez well ez he could."

"He'd hed a big run ov luck ag'in faro, an' keried ther bulk ov ten thousand dollarse ez he'd got buckin' ther tiger. But thar war suthin' else wot nobody ceptin' ther jedge knowed. Joe Eastman hed made his strike afore ther 'Pash lifted his hair, an' ther youngster hed located it. Fur ther sake ov ole times an' ter git capital ter develop er 'cause he war 'feared a boy couldn't hold it, he let Rivers in on the ground floor, an' made over ther him half ther strike ez a 'rignal locator. Ez I war sayin', ther jedge hed pards too, an' mebbe they put him up ter it. I ain't blamin' him ary more ner I kin help. Anyway, when ther jedge hed a half-centrest in ther mine, which are ther Red Rock, an' got him started 'long down, it war 'bout ther high time ter go fur ther balance."

"He war only a boy yit, yer understand; an' never dreamed ov ther man he'd bin admirin', an' give half his mine to, a throwin' off on him; an' never thort that he'd go back on him. Ary way; ther lad an' ther jedge war goin' ter take posseshun ov ther Red Rock ef yer could b'lieve him; an' they started; an' next thing they knowed ther jedge hed him. They camped ter-gether somewhere; an' that night somebody riz at ther boy an' throw'd him over ther rocks."

"It war jist a hundred foot to ther bottom, so yer kin jedge."

Uncle Davy halted in his narrative and the listening ladies uttered a cry of horror. The tones of the rounder had grown very impressive; and the longer he spoke the more they believed in the truth of his story—the more they believed that this Soft Jimmy was the Rolland Lande for whom they were searching.

"They killed him?" gasped Theodosia.

"A hundred foot cl'ar to ther rocks berlow—you kin jedge."

"Man alive! there is, there must be some mistake! How could you know this—unless you were one of the villains?"

"Oh, Unkel Davy are gin'rally 'round. He war camped up on ther ledge an' see'd ther hull thing; but jist then he war layin' low, an' he hadn't nary tools—not even a pop-gun erlong. Ef they'd 'a' knowed he war thar—whiz! Over he'd 'a' gone, ter keep him company. You bet he didn't give a whimper."

"An' that's how he got inter ther Red Rock—ther jedge did. But, ef yer notiss, he on'y hed a half-sheer. Ther queerdest thing war that sum one else hed ther right an' title ter that other half, an' bez bin keepin' it 'live ever sence. Ther jedge tried ter shoot him out, an' tried ter freeze him out; but he couldn't find him ter shoot, an' he didn't freeze wuth a cent. My idear's that ther pardner hev bin layin' low all this time ter find out who helped ther jedge that night ter throw the kid over ther rocks; an' when he duz, ther holy cirkiss'll open the doors an' make things centereatin' fur ther boys. Tie a double knot ef yer ain't got a pin."

"And who—who do you think has that other half? If I can find him—perhaps he can tell me something."

"Ther jedge thinks it's ther Short Sport; an' I reckon he ain't fur out."

"But who is the Short Sport?"

"I ain't sayin'—he's bad medicine fur Unkel Davy ter buzz about; but ef you war ter hint he war Pinnacle Pete I'd re-spond, your head's level. Stick a pin thar—an' tie a knot."

"Ef that yarn ain't wuth ten dollarse ther ole man don't know beans. No. Don't ax me any queshuns fur I ain't answerin'. Goslow on ther jedge, an' git him ter foller this thing up. Then, mebbe I'll see yer later. So-long. I'm goin' now."

"Just one moment, please. Tell me, who is Pinnacle Pete? I have heard his name often; of him, very little."

"Oh, Pete's ther dandy sport thet yer read erbout. He ain't bin shinin' ther light ov his pliz much on this camp; but he's made ther neighbors howl, an' the'r' all a-waitin' fur him hyar. When he kims fur good, drive er spake an' tie two knots. I'll be all thar. Nightly—night! I'm dry ez a fish an' ten dollarse ter squinch with. In half an hour I'll be full ez a lord. Yours truly."

He listened to no other appeal; but clapped his battered hat on his frowsy head and rolled away.

"That belley thue piecee stoly," sighed Wau Wing from the window. "But girley no tellee Livers Wau Wing hearum. He maskee Wau Wing too muchee sick-sick. He maskee Wau Wing once piece allee same co'pse. Eh, ch-hoy!"

"I shall not mention it," said Theo, coldly. "I must think over this. You can leave the room."

CHAPTER XXVI.

DAN THE DAISY EXPLORES WAY BACK.

THE door closed behind the little Chinaman before either of the girls said a word. When he had time to get fairly out of hearing Miss Lande spoke.

"Serena!"

"Yes, dear."

"Do you know—I am getting really afraid."

"So am I."

And these two girls that heretofore had never been daunted by anything sat together on the side of the bed, each with an arm around the other, and shivered.

"If he is dead, after all!"

"I cannot believe it. Such a miserable old wretch! Why do we believe in him at all?"

"Because he is this Judge Rivers' own witness. He said himself that the man could tell a great deal about the past if he could only be found and made to talk."

"Yet if there was such a story to be kept hidden he would not have dared to search for the man who might bring his crimes to light."

"But how did he know that this man knew aught of the midnight murder that has been unsuspected all these years? And why should Uncle Davy have avoided him if he had not some terrible secret, the possession of which he was afraid might be suspected? If there is any truth at all in the story we hold the old man's life in our hands. If we but breathed a whisper of what he has revealed to us he would die. And I had been so attracted toward him; had believed in him so!"

"What will we do? Must we run away?"

"No!" answered Theo, more firmly.

"We remain here until the mystery is thoroughly solved. I am convinced that we are on the track now. This ragged old villain will tell us more, no doubt, when he has seen Rivers. Evidently afraid of him, he yet wishes to do him harm. Having once been introduced to us, he can speak without exciting suspicion."

"And you think it is true that the Short Sport and Pinnacle Pete are one; that he holds the share of the mine that once was your brother's? If so he knows even more than Uncle Davy. And Sally Rice! Who's she? What has become of her? If we could but see her we might make a commencement of knitting together the frayed edges."

"They tell me that Rice, though a desperate man, who, in the few days he has been in the camp, has established quite a reputation, undoubtedly has left the town to avoid trouble with Rivers. He may never come back; but if other methods fail here we will look for him elsewhere. Oh, if I had only been prudent; if I had only procured the services of a good detective, and not waited until the last moment, to be befuddled in the way I was!"

"You have not been befuddled. Your detective is here, and you may yet learn better news than you look for."

The voice was again the voice of Millie Vandeleur, though it came drifting in scarcely louder than a whisper.

Once more they were startled, but this time they recognized the uselessness of looking for that ethereal young lady—and Serena furthermore received an idea.

"Theo, dear, I wonder—"

"Don't be afraid to speak. After what we have seen and heard 'most anything is within the bounds of probability. What is it that you wonder?"

"If Sally Rice was not Miss Vandeleur in disguise."

"Of course. Why did I not think of it before? That would explain what has been puzzling me."

If she is, then the Short Sport and Pinnacle Pete are the same without a doubt. But why do they not confide in us? Why do they leave us alone to fight our way in the dark?"

"I think they have kept reasonably near so far; I think they will be seen again, in due time. I feel stronger and bolder. Yes. With those two within speaking distance we are tolerably safe."

A good deal of Miss Theo's enthusiasm had left her, even before the appearance of Uncle Davy; but in its place, there was a large fund of obstinacy. In whispers, the two talked for an hour or more. If Judge Rivers's ears did not burn it was because he was too busy to notice it. When Sam Armadel met him shortly after this his face wore a troubled look so foreign to its usual expression that "the Specter" noted it at once.

"What's the matter with you? Don't your magnetic influence work on the young lady; or have you got more capital locked up in the safe than you can afford to lay out of?"

"Capital nothing! It was all going right until this evening and then came a balk such as I never dreamed of, and don't understand yet."

"How so? What's the matter?"

"I was telling the young ladies about a supposititious Uncle Davy, that I believed had some information if I could only find him."

"Well?"

"Why the infernal scoundrel called, mentioned my name as a guarantee, got about all the loose change they had, and told a long-winded yarn that took about an hour. I'd give a hundred to know what it was. I must know, too. It may turn everything upside down."

"Why, if you were going to introduce the man, what's the difference? Hunt him up and he'll tell you all he said for an extra fiver."

"Don't be a fool, Sam. The fact is, there is no such person, and that is what gets me. My idea was to wring in one, but it has been forestalled, and now I would like to know why and by whom."

"How did you find out?"

"There's a Chinaman at the Early Dawn who keeps me posted on what goes on there—I paid him specially well to keep an eye on the ladies. He came rushing around in a great hurry to tell me that a ragged, dirty old bum named Uncle Davy had been having an interview with them, and must have told them something terrible."

"But supposing the cat clears out of the bag—what are you going to do then?"

"Turn a new leaf and act Daisy. Daniel won't refund, and I'm not in the habit of coming out at the small end of my speculation."

"You may speculate once too often. There's enough money in the Red Rock to satisfy any reasonable man. Why didn't you stick to that?"

"Because I feel it in my bones that something is going to happen here, and I want to get out. Don't you see? I can't stock the mine, because I've only got a half-interest. And I've an idea when the break comes that it will be a bad one. There's enough old scores against all of us to swamp the Rothschilds if they were settled up. I might ask why you didn't keep out when you were once fairly away from these old stamping grounds?"

"And I'd say, because I was a blamed fool! All right! We'll stick together until the end comes. Perhaps that time is closer than we either of us think; but if so, all right! We've had a merry life, and I can't say that it has been such a short one, either. Let me know when you want me. There is nothing going on at the Mint, and I'm for bed by the first boat."

"I'll walk along with you. I feel that way myself, and we've got about to that point where the best thing we can do is to do nothing."

That was what the judge said, but it was not what he meant, by a long shot. Hardly had he seen Armadel to his room when he left the Early Dawn and walked briskly away to Paddy Milligan's. Things were not always so quiet there as it seemed, and he had an object in view. As he halted a moment in front of the door and looked around him, a man came rocking around the corner of the building.

"Hello—hic—stranser! Yer kerry a turnip? Ef so, wha's ther time ov day? Hic! Bin waitin' fur a hour ter strike some 'un that knowed. Wantcher see ef it's time ter drive ther calves ter milk."

As well as Rivers could see, the stranger was ragged, dirty, and very drunk.

Yet he did not answer him as he usually answered such style of man. He looked sharply, and then, with a patronizing laugh:

"Turnips don't go. We work by guess here, and on a rough one I'd say it was about an inch and a half of twelve. What's the matter with you?"

An outsider could have heard them both, and noticed nothing beyond what seemed to be on the surface; but the judge had recognized a hail that he had not heard for years, and had given an answer that would be satisfactory if it was more than chance, yet would not be understood by any man not acquainted with the signals.

"Kerrect you be—hic! I'm—hic—on ther boom, an' I'm jest waishin' for a mansh, but—hic—it's blame dry work. Cansh—hic—yer take me som'ers under coversh?"

"Here's the Mint—they let strangers in there if they behave themselves. If they don't, clubs are trumps."

The man came nearer, and muttered in an undertone:

"That's all right, Lightning—I want a little talk with you, and I don't want to give you away if some one happens to recognize me."

"You're not born to be drowned, or else you're a bigger fool than I took you for. What's wanted in Way Back that you run the risk of a necktie party? The boys got so worked up that if they have half a chance, they'll slop over. I can't hold them. This is no place for you; and I'm on ticklish ground as it is."

"That's all right. Let the boys slop. I'm good for the gang."

"But how about Pinnacle Pete? He's opened his fingers—when he closes them, look out. I've heard he had a terrific grip."

"That's it. That's what I want to see you about. Meet me in the little shanty on the road out to the Red Rock, and just beyond the town. I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

"I'll be there," answered Rivers, in the same guarded tone, and turned away, while the man in disguise went staggering off. Under the rags and dirt, and behind the husky voice, the judge had recognized Dan the Daisy.

Heretofore it had been Rivers that had said come, and his partners came. Now, Dan spoke as though he would brook no denial.

As Eric had been desirous of an interview, he did not hesitate to accede to the request, much as it sounded like an order.

He went into the saloon as though he had no further business with the old rounder; but he did not stay long. Fortunately, there was nothing to detain him there. Within twenty minutes he was approaching the deserted shanty, keeping a careful eye around to see that he was not watched.

"You came, did you?" said Dan, somewhat sharply.

"I thought perhaps you'd be too high and mighty, or too much afraid of compromising your precious reputation, to go out of your way to see an old-time pard. It's mighty good for you that you weren't. I tell you, you're in a heap of danger, and it's to get you onto it that I was fooling away time around Paddy's."

"I've always been in danger; what's the newest wrinkle?"

"You've been in danger that some one would find you out as you were, and trade on that knowledge. Well, that fellow is in town now, and he knows the whole catechism, from A to amperсанд. For ten dollars he gave away enough to hang the whole of us two or three times over; it got into the hands of that infernal detective, Pinnacle Pete. And if I'm not wide off, the story goes to him straight as soon as the bound shows up."

"What was it he gave away. There's a number of rich little anecdotes—"

"The facts in the case of Rolland Lande, and he gave them straight as a string. He's a bad man from up the creek, and don't you forget it."

"Who is; and who did he give them to?" and the judge added some words that were more intensely profane than profoundly polite.

"A fellow that ought to have been dead years ago—I'd have sworn he went over the range—Uncle Davy. And he poured the tale into the listening ear of your Donna Dulcinea. If that don't block your game, I'm no judge of the female gender."

"And how do you know this?"

There was suspicion in the judge's tone, and his hand wandered toward his revolver. So far he was admitting nothing.

"Honor bright! I was thinking of a game something like it myself—only I didn't intend to give the truth away by a long sight. I was tacking around the Early Dawn, and saw the galoot go in. I dropped to him in a minute, and was around at the window before you could say Jack Robinson. Blame me if one of 'em wasn't sitting in it. I'm hard to beat, though, and I just sneaked into the house, and caught enough to know what I'm talking about. Now, open up. What are you going to do about it?"

"I suppose there must be some more killing," answered the judge, speaking a little wearily. "You wouldn't like to take him off my hands for a consideration?"

"I can't hunt him all over town; but I'll save him from a longer sojourn in this weary world, if I happen to meet him. But, see here. What I want you to do is to get Sid Campton out of the way, somehow, in case it is necessary, while we go for the Fool of Way Back."

"What do you want with him?"

"Bless your simple soul! Haven't you struck that yet? It's Pinnacle Pete I'm after, and he's the lion in the ass's skin, or I'll chaw dirt."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE MINT HAS A VISITOR.

"PERHAPS you're right, but I can't exactly swallow it," answered the judge.

"Right or wrong it's all the same. He knows your game. That's what was the racket down at Coronado. There's just a chance that he hasn't given it away. When he does—but Uncle Davy has put a pretty square block in the road."

"And anyway he won't be so easy to drop."

"If we can't get hold of him we'll scoop the fair Isabel. I tell you Campton is away, and we have a chance till he gets back. If that don't bring him to the front I want to know. And the boys are all wild to get a chance with their carbines."

"They had one chance, and when I saw them the boot was on the other leg."

"The girl was the first item then, and she protected him. Revenge and safety are the words now. Maybe he's not such a mighty chief as you think for. He can shoot a storm, but how about his sand? Mighty low has he laid since he gave us the slip in the mountains. We're waiting for him, but he don't come. Just showed up once at the edge of the camp. Met a couple of my boys, and both sides are running yet. A regular scare all around."

"Yes, I heard of it. They didn't have those Winchesters ready. While you are about it you had better take Campton. He's a bad man to have loose in the camp. And did you ever stumble across the man they call, here, the Short Sport? He's been gyrating around for the last few weeks, off and on, and has made a heap big reputation."

"Eh! yes. I heard of him. Got you in hoc for a small-sized fortune."

"Hoc, humbug! There's a bait in Paddy's safe. He'll never leave it behind him. As long as that is there he'll not jump the camp for good. I'll give you a thousand for his scalp and a paper he showed me. It's of no good to him or you, as it lies; but I'd give a nice little pile to have it, all the same."

"Then you and I are working together once more. That's as it should be. Give your boys the wink not to slip into my game when they see it played, and I'll look after yours."

"It's a bargain. But look sharp that no one gets onto you. I daren't run the camp the way I ought to, and used to. I've too much at stake. If they thought I was laying in with the Daisies there's enough here, with this Campton and Doc De France at the head, to make it awful sultry."

"Say, Lucifer, throw up your hand! I'll swear I never thought you'd lose your sand; but you're doing it, and you know what that means. Campton's a quiet man, but an infernal good one. If you've got him yet—but of course you have. Why, man alive! he's laying in with Pinnacle Pete."

"If Pete's not laying for him," answered the judge, reflectively. "I've been watching the man for some time. He's been laying low for some reason, and if he hasn't a story call me a Dutchman. How would that work?"

"It won't gee. They're after us. We can take them in out of the dew, we can pull out, or we can go up the flume. And you never knew Daisy Dan sit down to a game that he didn't play his hand out for all the cards were worth. We've got about twenty-four hours yet to make the bottom deal in; and by the red-hot flames in Satan's bedchamber, the deal will be made."

"Make it, then, and you'll find me playing in with you. How about Sam?"

"Don't trust him. When I had him I'd better kept him. We went back on him once, and he's never forgotten. It was a mistake to bring him in. There's too many that know your game. If Sam goes back on us it will be nasty enough; but don't forget Uncle Davy, Sid Campton, and the tow-headed Uriah."

"Not very likely—nor the Short Sport and his sister. Oh, it's a game worth playing in and it puts me in mind of old times. I've got the men behind me, if they do their work well; and with the Daisies back of you we can hold our own, or die trying."

"That's so, my old and noble captain; but you observe all that is worth something to me. I'm loose-footed, and can climb out to-night; if I stay, and help you out of the drag, how much is it going to be worth? It's funny, you see, but I never dropped to how you got into the Red Rock until I heard Uncle Davy telling his yarn to-night. It struck me all in a heap, for I ought to have been into that just as far as my pard. What do you say, old man? You can't expect me to work for nothing, and there's been some changes since you laid out this game with Rolland Lande's sister."

"I thought I was pretty liberal in my offer."

"Mighty liberal; but, you see, this girl has been bad medicine. Revolver Rube and Durango Dave got counted out on the first fly; Sam is looking out for his own interests exclusively, or I'm a bald-headed idiot; and I'm the only chance left. The boys behind me don't count—I'll pay them if the game goes on. What do you say; and say it quick?"

"Halves—if you get these men out of my way, and help with the work."

"Your hand for ninety days. I knew we'd get together if we chinned long enough. I don't go so much on your heiress; but I'm all gone on the child with the chestnut curls. If it all turns

out as rich as we anticipate, I wouldn't mind settling down. I'll attend to that part of the game, though. It won't be any harder than for you to make an impression on the charming Theodosia."

"Make a fool of yourself as you please. Of course this leaves nothing for Sam."

"What in Hades did you take him in for?"

"Because I knew he had an eye on the lady as soon as I saw him get off the train; and if I didn't he would sell us out. He was the only one that could do it safely. You know he kicked like a Texas steer when we came in from the job."

"Yes, Sam is a nervy little fellow; but he never got much above cards. For red work he hadn't the head. I've got him under shadow; and now that we've come to terms, I'll give you one pointer that maybe you know, and maybe you don't. Pinnacle Pete, the Short Sport, and the simple Uriah, are all the same person. When you touch one you tickle them all."

"You're dreaming!"

"Nary dream. What Uncle Davy didn't remark I figured out myself a little later. It makes the job a heap shorter."

"And the woman?"

"A female detective, that's fooled us too cute for anything. She and Pete work together—Vandeleur is one of the names she goes under—and if they've disappeared, it's because they thought they had been dropped to. Bet your life they break out in a new place. Now, I'm going; but I'll see you later. You understand I and the boys are in town, all dressed up, and when you need us we'll be around. Don't look so like a fool. Good men get away off some-times, and it was just luck and nothing else that put me solid on the game. Halves, remember. I'll let you know when the racket begins."

"Halves it is," answered the judge, again shaking hands with his old comrade, who lingered no longer, while Rivers was so busy with his own thoughts that he did not ask for any further explanations, or attempt to stop him.

"It may be true—it must be true. If Jack Stevens had got in his work the other night, when I gave him the signal, the whole game would have been saved. Now—I'll carry her off if I have to join the Daisies and spend the honeymoon in the mountains. Curses on it! The girl *could* have cared for me! The chances are that she will take fright and run for it. I must watch her, and at the first sign shut down. Twenty-four hours! If Dan fails me I'll do the work myself. But Dan never fails. I wonder when he is going to begin? It's a big stake he plays for; but hang me if he don't propose to earn it!"

Dan had, in fact, already begun.

Once again in the open air and he was the drunken stroller that had accosted the judge. If any one had noticed him in the earlier part of the night he would not have found any sudden conversion to wonder at. Only a little nearer to being sober, perhaps, but evidently still on the same drunk. Toward the Mint he wound his way, and only pausing a moment at the door, to stare stupidly at the blazing lantern that hung above, he stumbled into the room, swinging his battered old hat.

"Whoopee! Hyar I be! What'll yer all hev? Name yer vanerties an' then ax me up ter juice. I'm dry ez a herrin'-bone, an' hungry ez a young b'ar. Whar's me ole side pard, Bobby Rice? They said he war 'round town hyar, an' I bin ter every gin-mill in ther burg, but he don't show up fur pickled plums. An' whar, oh, whar, are Unkel Davy? Two ole pards ov mine ramblin' through ther groves ov Way Back, an' pore, ole Olly Ootz stampin' 'round, dead broke, flat bu'st, an' dyin' fur one more drink! Ain't ther' noboddy hyar ez hez pity fur a miser'ble orphan? Jest three fingers and thum' over ther top ov ther glass. Jess see me tremble."

And with a lumbering sort of grace he began to shuffle his well-worn brogans, bringing them down with a deftness that was surprising, considering his appearance and condition. As he rattled his heels on the floor, and gave a heavy strike for a finish, he turned squarely to the bar and added:

"Johnny, won't yer trust?"

"Johnny," who was the bartender on duty at the time, reached down for a convenient club, and there was business in his eye; but before he had had time to straighten "Olly Ootz" had added:

"Cause ef yer won't, set 'em up fur one, an' take yer change outen that."

On the bar, as he spoke, he spun a twenty-dollar gold-piece, and finished his speech with a drunken wink.

"Many more where that came from?" asked Johnny, a little doubtfully.

"A few—jist quite a few. Olly ain't nigh so hard-up ez he looks; an' ef noboddy else shouts he treats hisself."

From his pockets he fished up a handful of gold and silver; and the mind of the tumbler-juggler was relieved, for he noted that the gold was of different denominations. The chances were that the piece on the bar was good. He set down the decanter and a tumbler.

"There's one thing I'd have you remark, old

gentleman. The Mint is not exactly a hoodlum-hall. We do things quietly and in order here. When a gentleman gets full he must *not* slop over. If he does, whether he begins it early or late, we fire him out. You seem to be a stranger here so I give you the rules of the place. Sabbe?"

"Yer Uncle Oliver are fly, an' you'll find him gentle ez a spring lamb. I've hed my blow-out an' are jest taperin' off. Ther furdur I goes, now, the milder I git, and there ain't er bit ov danger. But say, you all; hev yer seen anything ov me ole side-pard? They tole me all 'long ther road he war jest ahead but nary thing hev I seed ov him. I know he couldn't steer through Way Back, 'thout stoppin' some'ers, an' I've stopped at all ther gin-mills in camp, but nary sight hev I hed ov him. Say, hez ary galoot hyar seen him?"

"You'd better simmer down on that, old man. There's too much wind for the size of your mouth-organ. Who is this side-pard that you're hunting now?"

"Didn't I say it loud, an' say it early? It's that long-legged, limber-shanked son ov a gun, Uncle Davy. I'm chasin' him with a hot stick, and I want ter ketch on afore he hez a chance ter cut a throat an' raise the town. Mebbe he's hed his chance, got in his work, an' skipped. Don't noboddy know ov him?"

"Who's that you're chinnin' about?" asked another outsider.

"Never heard of such a man around here by that name. Who is he? What has he bin a doin'?"

"Ef you goes over ter Carter's Fork an' axes that question they'll pint yer to a rope a-danglin' in front of ther stage offiss; an' they'll say it's fur him. Why, dog-gone him, his scalp's wuth a cool thousand, an' that's what I'm a chasin' him fur. Thort everyboddy knowed ez he'd slit Lame Johnny's tharpple! That's jest it, an' yer know what store ther Fork sets on him."

"Then he's not altogether your most devoted friend?"

"Nary. Him an' me traveled tergether fur 'bout a week, an' that's why I'm lookin' fur him. When him an' me meets ther'll be blood on ther floor. Ter think of him er-playin' off. Borried ten dollars, did a job like that, an' then stampeded right erlong, 'thout givin' me back my duckats, let erlone a sheer ov ther plunder."

"Much plunder goin'?"

"That's what gits me—ef I on'y knowed. But I'm givin' yer all notiss. I'm a-huntin' ov Uncle Davy ter take him back ter Cactus Fork, an' claim ther reward. Ef thar's arybody ez helps I'll pay him accordin'; but he's my meat, an' I'm bossin' ther job."

A tough-looking fellow, in the garb of a miner leaned over the bar, speaking in a low tone:

"Touch him easy, Johnny. It's big money thet he's a 'tective, an' jest lettin' on ter be soaked tell he kin sight his man."

Johnny winked slowly.

"Don't advise yer uncle. I see the tail of the mouse. Let her wiggle."

"An' ef ary gerloot sees this infernal cut-throat, Unkel Davy—"

"W'y, jest stick a pin thar, an' tie er knot. Hyar's Davy ter shout fur hisself."

And to the surprise of every one a second edition of Olly Ootz came shuffling through the crowd.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

TWO OLD PARDS MEET.

UNTIL Daisy Dan had mentioned his name, no one at the Mint had heard of Uncle Davy; not, certainly, for some years. There had been such a vagabond once upon a time, and possibly some one had at some time heard of him; but up to the present the light of his countenance had never shone upon Way Back. If Daisy Dan—under the guise of Olly Ootz—had intended to discount any revelations he might make, he had an unexpected opportunity to see how his scheme was going to work.

"Ov all bald-headed liars, this hyar man," continued Uncle Davy, "jest takes ther cake. W'y, dog-rot his dirty picters, he ain't bin ter Cactus Fork—he dassn't go thar! An' him a-shootin' off his dirty mouth about ole Unkel Davy, ez hez bin knowed all erlong ther coast an' over ther plains sence 'forty-nine, ez ther squardest gerloot ez ever flipped a keard er downed a quart ov benzine ter a settin'! Jest look at him, an' then look at me, an' say which are ther honest man—wich Cactus Fo'k 'ud be likely ter be guunin' fur."

He pointed his right hand with scorn at the fictitious Olly, who appeared amazed at his coming, and with his left fist thumped his breast vigorously, while his cheeks swelled out till his face looked like an inflated bladder.

The surprise died out of Olly's face, and through the dirt there beamed a sheen of radiant joy.

"Unkel Davy! W'y, dog-gone yer dod-rotted, black-spotted, limber-j'inted long-legs! Put her thar, pard! Put her *right* thar! I'm gladder ter hev met yer then ef I'd struck ile—a hundred-barril spouter, an' me erlone on ther ground floor. Shake!"

"Pard, did yer say? Did I onderstand yer ter say, pard? W'y, 'pon me soul ter glory! I never seed him afore! An' me, Unkel Davy, ther 'rig'nal ole ink-slinger, ez writ ther lives ov every pilgrim ez walks this side ov ther slope, an' kin call 'em all by name when I git my two eyes on 'em. Yer a fraud, you be, an' a drunken ole sack ov bones, w'at ain't sense ernuf ter know they's dead an' orter be berried. Call me an' ole side pard, will yer? Take it back er fight!"

"Fight? Fight's w'ot I kim in hyar fur. Fight's w'ot I bin chasin' yer all over ther burg fur. Fight's w'ot I want, an' w'ot I'm gwine ter hev; an' all I'm askin' are—how 'll yer take it?"

Yet, in spite of this desperate talk, it did not seem that Olly Ootz was altogether happy. He looked around anxiously at the bystanders, and appealingly at Johnny behind the bar.

One and all failed to respond in the way that he appeared to desire. No one came to the rescue; no one gave any signs of wanting any share of the reward that was waiting back at Cactus Fork.

It was not fear that paralyzed the bystanders, anyhow.

Although there were some few that still gave the fellow credit for being a detective, every one was laughing more or less at the different changes of tone that had followed each other so closely, while sympathy, outside of the desire they might have to share in the reward, was entirely with the second comer, though, so far as looks went, there was little to choose between them. With Paddy Milligan out of the room, and Johnny inclined to be complaisant, there was every prospect of a heap of fun.

"Sail right inter him that way!" sung out one of the boys. "We'll back yer high, Uncle Davy. You couldn't hev come ter a better place than Way Back ter git fair play. Git up an' git at him afore he dusts, fur he's thinkin' strong ov goin'."

The two men were watching each other with the eyes of hawks. Whatever they might say, and however they might act, they were not overlooking any movements. The encouraging shouts did not cause any haste to be made. When Olly stepped forward two paces the other stepped as many back. It might have been from fear; or just as likely to get into the corner at the bar, where he knew there was no one behind him.

Then he put up both hands in a by no means inartistic attitude of offense, while he growled:

"Yer can't fight one side ov me, an' it's jest wastin' time I be, on a blame poor show fur fun; but ef yer wants ter try it on hyar I be, an' hyar I come. Knots an' pins! Ther cyclone are a bu'stin', an' every thin's loose at one end!"

Then he ran at his man, and shot his fist straight out when he got within distance, in a way that was awkward to look at and mighty awkward to get away from. It seemed to be only a straight jab, but the fact was the weight of his body went pretty well along with it, and Dan the Daisy, to his surprise and disgust, went reeling back, his arms sawing the air, while it was all that he could do to keep from measuring his length on the floor.

He recovered himself, however, by a dexterous twist, and then sprang forward to a close. There were few such fighters as he when he was on his mettle, but the attack had found him a little off his guard. He had not expected it. Rather, if anything, he looked for lead or steel; and had held himself ready to pull at the first motion for a gun.

"Here, here!" shouted Johnny, making a movement to come from behind the bar, and giving a wave of the cudgel he had caught up.

"If you gentlemen want to fight, get outside just too quick. You'll have all outdoors to do your work in—you can't do it in here—and I'll bet five to four on Uncle Davy."

"Four ter five on ther other man, an' let 'em fight it out right thar," shouted the tough who had suggested that Ootz might be a detective.

"My man hez ther underholt; don't yer break it, er thar'll be blood on ther floor!"

The tough flourished a wallet in one hand and a revolver in the other; and a dozen or more men of the same ilk were crowding around in great excitement. Such a skirmish didn't come off every day in the week, and it was more than likely that it would develop into something larger before Johnny cleared the room.

The two were clinched, back-hold, each with one upper and one underhold.

There was no more talking now, but all silent, honest industry.

Backward and forward they swayed, their forms closely knit together, and each found that the other had the hug of a bear. First one, then the other, gave back a little, each recovering by a powerful effort, the ground he had lost.

A little ring around them the crowd made, half a dozen deep, each neck craned forward to see every move, more than one hand grasping a pistol, though as yet there was nothing to call for the exhibition.

Then the struggle grew fiercer. There were tugs and wrenches, locks and twists, and then suddenly one went thundering to the floor, the other adding his weight to the fall.

"Didn't I told yer so? Stick er pin thar, an' tie er knot! Ole 'forty-nine are hard ter beat. Lemme see what ther gerloot looks like when ther war-paint an' fixin's are washed off. Yer Unkel Davy are a boss ter trot, an' a bad man at Way Back."

Gasping a little, his breath somewhat quickened by his exertion, he sputtered out these words, while he twisted his left hand into the hair of Olly Ootz, seizing his chin with the right, meanwhile staring down into the face of the under man.

"Thar's yer pin!"

A swinging bit from behind straightened him out almost senseless, and as he lay there faintly quivering there came a rush of footsteps. Johnny had only time to get in one good, honest blow with his club when a gang closed in around him and hustled him away with much laughter and rude jollity. Both the wrestlers were out of time, and they had opportunity to attend to him. While he struggled frantically to shake loose from the half-dozen that hampered him so much that he could not strike, Olly Ootz bounded to his feet and without a word rushed out of the open door.

"Oook-ook-ook-aw!" crowed Uncle Davy, rising to a sitting posture and watching the retreating form.

"I knowed I could git him ef I hed room ter spread 'cordin' ter my size. Sumbody stop him!"

But his words were too late. Olly ran so fast he fairly flew, nor did he tarry outside. When Uncle Davy came staggering out in his wake he had disappeared.

The one blow of Johnny's cudgel had done the business. Olly was off and away, nor did he stop until he was fairly out of town.

Certain there was no one in sight he seated himself. In ten minutes more he was joined by several others who seemed to know just where to find him.

"All correct, captain," said the first, a slender young man. "Johnny stuck to his fort like a fine fellow, as long as he could stand it, but when he gave me a chance it didn't take long to see the safe. There's the impression of the lock; and by to-morrow I'll have the key to fit it. It's got more weight than strength, or I'm not Jimsey the Driller."

"A thundering sight of rumpus to fix that safe; but we got them. To-morrow we'll interview the strong box and see what its hows that is worthy of taking."

CHAPTER XXIX.

WAU WING'S LITTLE POINTER.

THE young ladies at their breakfast with about the average appetite with which the cuisine of the Early Dawn inspired them. It had been a long time since Miss Theodosia had seen her brother, so that the intelligence that she had received the preceding evening was not, since she had a night to sleep over it, quite so saddening, or altogether so terrific as it might have been if heard before she had had personal experience with the uncertainties of the "wild and woolly West."

And it was a great deal easier to remember the general unreliability of Uncle Davy's appearance, than the earnest truthfulness he had managed to instill in his tones. His revelation was worth looking after anyhow, though it might not be just so easy to do so without revealing to Eric Rivers its substance, which she did not wish to do.

"Serena, dear, we are just wasting time," was her remark, after leaving the breakfast-table.

"It is positive that no one hereabouts knows anything of the name or reputation of poor Rolland. I begin to think Uncle Davy was more knave, even, than he looked; and I cannot conceive how I came to give any credit to his story."

"The dear judge is not to be doubted, then. I wouldn't doubt him either—if I were you. Of course it's only a friendly interest and a that rubbish. Come, be honest, now. Are you hunting Rolland in particular—or mankind in general for a fair specimen to be sequestered for your especial use? Indeed, I wouldn't hesitate between the two if it is the latter you are after. The judge is considerably your senior; but he is rich, handsome, and seems to understand what will please a lady. Suppose you take him and be happy."

"Oh, Serena!"

"Young lady! For a person with as much force of character as I know you to possess, you do and say some of the most ridiculous things! You want to find out the truth about Rolland? Well, Uncle Davy's story is a suggestion, anyhow. You have spent eleven thousand dollars without getting along that far, and then he comes and gives you one for ten. It's cheap, but a very complete article. Until you can find a better one, why not follow it out and see what it is worth?"

"Serena, you have seen the judge—tell me truly. Do you think it possible that he can be such a villain? I cannot; and I would be ashamed to let him know that I had heard such a slander."

"You needn't."

"And how then am I to find out any more about it? Make a journey to Walnut Bar and Hard Luck?"

"Perhaps; but there are other things you may do first. No doubt he will call to-day—perhaps this morning. You can easily see if it is worth while to investigate, without letting him know what you are at."

"Not so easy as you seem to think. What excuse can I give should I ask any questions that will bear on those points?"

"Mercy! Excuse? Ask him if he was ever at Walnut Bar, and if so, you can invent a dozen queries that could give no offense. Ask him if he ever met a boy that was called Soft Jimmy. Say that in one of his letters to your uncle he mentioned that name. How will he know what you mean if he is innocent? If he is guilty, I will wager anything that his face will show it."

"I might try it, or I might mention something about the prospecting party. What more natural than that Rolland sent a letter full of regrets, and saying that he was just starting on a desperate journey. I will try it, since no harm can be done, in any event; and if he does not come in soon I will ask for him, or send for him. We will know the worst."

There was an interruption—Wau Wing with a letter—or, a note, rather. The judge knew how to handle a pen as well as he did a revolver. It was short, yet it expressed a thousand regrets without saying so.

Business called him to the Red Rock. If needed, would Miss Lande send for him? Otherwise he would be detained until evening. He hoped to be able in a day to get things in such shape that his presence would not be needed for some time, so that he could be at Miss Lande's service for any investigations she might wish to make.

That was the substance of the note, only he hardly used that many words.

"There. In the face of such kindness as that, could I call him away from his business on account of such a brutal suspicion as we have been harboring? The thought of it makes me blush all over."

"I see it does," answered Serena, dryly.

"You will have to have another interview with Uncle Davy this morning, to tone you up. As the judge does not mention him, no doubt the two failed to meet. Perhaps our valuable Celestial could drag him in."

"Wau Wing, do you think you could find the ragged old rascal you introduced to us last evening?"

"Glooly, no! Him heapsee bad man. Him cut-throat, fion Cactus Folk. Pleeceyman come las' nighty, say lopee allee leddy, t'ousan' tolla allee leddy, him takee back. Him gone; him hop see t'ig; him skin outee; him maskee him belley much ska'se. Wau Wing no can finde any such piecey man. Dat t'e tluth, belley much gallow."

The young ladies looked at each other inquiringly. The Chinaman's words were tolerably plain—they were almost sure they caught his meaning.

"You say the policemen came for him last night, and said there was a reward of a thousand dollars offered for him at Cactus Fork, and that he would be hanged if taken there?"

Wau Wing nodded his head vigorously.

"Tat allee plopa. Unkey Davy one bad piecey la-li-lung—one piecey lobber man. W'at tim' t'e pleeceyman cohom, tat tim' Unkey Davy go. No hap pidgin be'ah; hap belley big pidgin th'ah."

"That will do. I feared that we would find the vagabond that style of man. Had he been possessed of such a secret as that, he would never have sold it for ten dollars. Either he would have imparted it freely and without price, or he would have asked a great deal more. After all, Mr. Rivers is our only dependence. We can do nothing by ourselves. We have tried it, and accomplished positively nothing."

"How 'bout Pinnacle Pete? Him heapsee good man tie to. Him be loundee soon. Betlee tie to he. When shootee begin, finde he 'way uppee."

Wau Wing lingered, and threw in the suggestion for what it was worth.

"The Chinaman is my man forever!" exclaimed Serena.

"If you can find the gentleman of the high altitudes, you will do us an everlasting favor. But he has kept himself wonderfully well hidden, and if you know where to find him, you are the wisest man in Way Back."

"Wau Wing no can finde he; he finde she belley much. Wau Wing no can say what side he go—he cohom out top side fitee-fitee when him 'gins to loll on wheels. Glil wanthee Pinnacle Pete, she no talkee-talkee; she no chin-chin; she keepsce dla'k. Him be allee loundee, allo lightey, an' heapsee sma't inside! He finde glil's butta; he blingee he top side fitee-fitee, fu'st chop. Eh, ch'hoy?"

With a succession of nods and winks the little gentleman from the flower-land twisted out his information, and then skipped out of the room.

The girls stared at each other.

"Saul among the prophets!" exclaimed Serena.

"Wau Wing giving us a point! Say nothing and do nothing; this mysterious Pinnacle Pete is working in our interests, and may perhaps bring back the missing Rolland. I must say that I prefer trusting the Chinaman to letting the judge further into our confidence. Theodosia, that is certainly the best news that I have heard yet, if it be really founded on anything like fact. All I want to know at present is whether Wau Wing speaks by card, or is only making a shrewd guess."

"A wild guess, indeed!" ventured Theodosia.

"Speaking by the card, as I am a miserable sinner!" retorted Miss Wild.

"Just wait and you will see."

"Perhaps that is the scheme—to have us wait. Yet another day can make but little difference. I shall do nothing and say nothing more until I can see Judge Rivers."

"On your life don't you tell him a word of this! One side or the other is for you, and I believe in Pinnacle Pete. If you give away any information you are working against your own interests—it may be for your own ruin. You have no idea of the danger you stand in. I do not want to alarm you; but I see more than ever that here we are beyond the law, and a prize that these villains will never willingly let slip through their fingers. I believe there will be bloodshed, and there may be death before we see home again."

For about the first time in her life Serena spoke not only solemnly but impressively, and Theo, who was ordinarily too headstrong to be easily influenced, was affected even more than she knew, and she knew it was a great deal.

"What have you heard?" she exclaimed, in a thick whisper. "Certainly more than you have told me."

"Very little; but that little was a warning. We have talked very bravely about shooting; but the time may come that we will have to do something at it in good earnest. But never mind me. I am nervous; I am worn; I am not near as courageous as I thought; and instead of being an aid and comfort I am doing my best to frighten you before the time. You knew me better than I knew myself."

The increasing nervousness of her companion had a calming effect, strange as it may seem.

"Humbug!" she said, quietly.

"You have had a long journey, and several very exciting adventures. Now we have had a day or so of rest and quiet, and the reaction has come. Here, you must move about. Fresh air and sunshine are the medicines that Doctor Lande prescribes. They will be better for you than lavender and valerian."

"If taken anywhere else than in Way Back. But come! we will try your prescription. There can be little danger in daylight; surely, you will not venture beyond the limits of the town."

"Have you got your revolver with you?"

"Yes. But where are you going?"

"Where the spirit moves us. Something tells me that our excursion will not be without its profit."

The jesting tone of Theo had its effect. Her friend brightened, laughed, and followed without a word. As they descended the steps of the porch Wau Wing came skipping down.

"Girley go walkee? Wau Wing go walkee. Bad man come him an' he levolver maskee Lome howlee, belley much alle way uppee."

CHAPTER XXX.

URIAH DROPS.

THE presence of the Chinaman had not been specially desired; but since he had made his appearance neither thought of sending him back. Somehow he had dropped into their confidence, and without any great faith in his courage or his wit they tacitly accepted him as about as good a makeshift as Way Back could produce in the line of disinterested friendship.

He dropped behind a few paces, and followed with a gravity that would have been really amusing if the young ladies could have only seen it.

Way Back did not offer much of a field for promenaders, nor much of beauty to sight-seers. It was a straggling, miserably-built little camp, the Early Dawn Hotel and the Mint Saloon being the largest, and indeed about the only good buildings in it, though there were a few others that were comfortable by comparison with the rest, and the post-office was in a small but substantial house.

Sid Campton's residence was not within the limits of the town proper, and so didn't count.

Theo and her friend had already explored the town, and knew about what to expect. The streets showed no sign of the late rain, the red clay being baked to an almost brick hardness; and save a roughness here and there the walking was very fair if one was willing to keep in the middle of the road between the houses.

Without making deliberate choice, they strolled along in the direction they had taken the evening of their flight from the Mint, and finally found themselves just where they had been when the two outlaws had recaptured them.

They fancied they could see, as they looked around, the very spot whence the fellows rose

up, and where the stutterer stood when the sound of his voice caused them to run away.

For almost the first time they realized how much they were indebted to Uriah for his appearance.

"Serena, it is very queer that the mystery never before appeared to me so strange."

"What mystery, dear?"

"Or our indebtedness so deep. Really, we have been very ungrateful, or—or—something else. It addles my head to think of it."

"Again I fail to understand you."

"Why, you see, if the stammering man they call Uriah, and the Fool from Way Back, and all that, had not been just where he was we would have been carried away again to the mountains. It is evident that the outlaws believed him to be the man who, single-handed, fought almost their whole band, and was on the point of effecting our rescue."

"I see."

"But if that man was Pinnacle Pete—I can well believe it from what they say of him—and if Pinnacle Pete and the Short Sport are the same, this could not have been he, since we left him behind us when we ran away from the Mint."

"Very true."

"But this was the man that was taken from the stage at the same time that we were. How do you suppose he got away; where had he been meantime? And you heard what Sally Rice said? I am afraid we made a very great mistake when we failed to have Uriah hunted up."

"As no doubt we would have done had not the judge disparaged the man with whom he lives. It looks as if every one had taken a little too much for granted when a few moments of sober thought would have shown that there was a mistake somewhere."

"I wonder if we could find him now?"

As they had slackened their pace Wau Wing had gained on them so much as to be within hearing distance.

"Hi-yah! You wanchee see Uliah? Him Missee Campton's compladoab. Walkee-walk one littee piecee fluddah glil findee Campton house. T'at t'ing be fu'st-chop, numbee one. He allo time t're. Askee whatchee wantee him talkee, talkee fluth allo time. T'at w'y him callo Foolee flom Way Back."

"Is it worth our while?" said Theo, inquiringly. "Where does this Mr. Campton live? How far is it from here?"

"One little piecee stlaight ahead. You go so fashion you findee chop-chop. Maybe maskee big t'ing on ice. Eh, ch'hoy!"

He pointed along a narrow trail that was almost hidden among the mesquites, and it was evident that he meant it was only a short distance.

The town had almost disappeared from sight, but there seemed no danger near; no reason why they should not continue their stroll if it was likely to lead to anything.

"Show the way," said Theo.

"We will follow you, but keeep an eye out for danger. There is no telling what is going to happen before we get out of these woods."

The fresh air, the sunshine and exercise had produced a very stimulating effect, certainly, or they would scarcely have thrust themselves into the line of adventure so soon after their doleful conference at the Early Dawn. Wau Wing was in front now, and went forward like one who knew the road, until there was a break in the shrubbery.

"Hi-yah!" he exclaimed.

"T'at's one piecee Uliah now. He cohom to Way Back. Glil wautchee talkee-talkee wit' he, stay light heah."

It was a good enough spot for an interview, and they took the advice, seating themselves upon a convenient bank, and watching the approach of Uriah, the stutterer, whom they recognized without any difficulty.

"Supposing, Theo, that the gentleman should turn out to be your long-lost brother, what would you do about it?"

There was a twinkle in Serena's eyes as she asked the question. The idea had occurred to her, and it seemed too comical not to ventilate it; and she was surprised to note the start that Theodosia gave. It led her to continue the badinage.

"Come, now, you asked him no questions, and I'll wager that he has never heard your name. Why might it not be? The transition from Soft Jimmy to the Fool of Way Back is not so hard to understand, and with all due respect to your feelings, from what you have said of Master Rolland this fresh young rustic would just about fill the bill."

"Hush, dear! Don't jest on such a serious subject. Rolland was easily led, though hard to drive; but he was not precisely a fool."

"And this young gentleman is not as big a fool as he looks. Note the color of his hair and eyes, and his walk. Really—oh!"

The brief exclamation was wrung from her in her surprise, but it had hardly escaped her—had he been listening so near were the watchers that he could have heard it—before she clapped her hand to her mouth and cowered down, pointing in silence.

After that the rest could both see and hear.

While the two young ladies were watching him, there was a sharp report, and then, with outstretched arms, and the blood welling out over his face, Uriah fell headlong.

CHAPTER XXXI,

THE DAISIES AGAIN AT THE FRONT.

THE Fool from Way Back lay motionless as he had fallen, and for an instant the spectators of the tragedy cowered as silent, waiting to see what would come next.

Perhaps the late jesting conversation of Serena now bore its fruit.

"I can stand it no longer," whispered Theodosia.

"It must have been an accident. Surely no one could be so brutal as to shoot him down in cold blood. See, no one appears; the report seemed to come from a distance. Perhaps he is not dead. I will go to him."

Hesitating no longer, she ran down the path along which he had been advancing.

The distance was nothing—only a few yards. Before the others thought of whispering a caution or stretching out a hand to detain her, she was at his side, and holding his head in her lap, unmindful of the blood that was staining her hands and slowly dropping down upon her dress.

Serena for a moment did not move, but watched in breathless eagerness for some sign of recognition.

None came. Half hidden though his features were with the crimson stain, it seemed certain that Theo would have recognized him, had he been her brother. Before she had laid his head down softly, Serena had come forward, and Wau Wing was by her side.

"What shall we do?" cried Serena, looking helplessly at the body.

"Hla, ha! Do nothing at all, little one, but to raise your hands up very empty, and very high, and keep them there until you get your orders. And you, Miss Lande, don't worry about the guileful fraud that has managed to steal the title of the Fool from Way Back. I generally know just where I put my lead, and though this seems to have bit a little deeper than I intended it, you can safely take your affidavit that he's all right up to the present time, save and excepting a slight thump on the skull that will end—if it has time—in a thumping headache. Here, three or four of you fellows! Here's the biggest piece of luck I ever prayed for. Took in a whole flock with one stone. One of you tie the crittur up so he can't do no damage when he begins to try to kick, a couple of you lead off the young ladies; and as for the Chinaman—blame his infernal Mongolian features!—I guess you'd better cut his throat."

The speaker was Dan the Daisy himself, and he seemed to be backed by force enough to make all thought of resistance or escape a folly. He had, as he had threatened, kept an eye on the trail, and when Uriah came along, without a word of warning, down he went. He came out quietly from the mesquites, and at his heels four or five of his henchmen. When Uriah fell they remained hidden long enough to see if any one was in hearing distance; when the young ladies appeared they found they had done more than they had counted on, and came into the open silently and without hesitation.

Every one of the three was taken off guard, Theodosia still knelt over the senseless man, Serena was at her shoulder watching them both, while bending over, with a curious look of concern in his yellow face, Wau Wing had eyes and ears for nothing else.

So it was that when Daniel spoke his first word Theodosia felt his hand on her shoulder, tightening slowly into a grip that she knew no strength of hers could shake off, Serena was looking into the muzzle of the captain's revolver while two of the road-agents, one on each side, had seized the Chinaman in no gentle grasp.

Between the shock of seeing what they believed was a cool-blooded assassination, and the reappearance of the Daisies, the two friends had nothing to say.

With Wau Wing it was different. For him the danger was more immediate and pressing. There was no joke in the tones of Dan the Daisy. With other men than outlaws the life of a Chinaman was held scarcely so high as that of an ox; and his order was very likely to receive a literal interpretation. The man on his right let go his hold and stepped a pace back, drawing his knife and looking at the little fellow with a ferocious glare.

"Jest turn his head back, an' hole his chin up a bit till I kin git a fair sight at his thrapple. Betcher a slug I kin slice his nutt clean off at the fu'st chop."

"Wal, jest see yer don't slice me. It's durned easy ter chop a leetle too fur," and he stood a little out while he gave a jerk at Wau Wing's head, which he was clutching by the pigtail that had become unwound.

Wau Wing's tongue was silent, but his mind was wide awake. Like a flash his little hand that had just received its freedom shot out, and down dropped the speaker more suddenly than if the knife had struck him as he feared. Then around wheeled the Chinaman, and darted at the man with the knife. He moved like a wild-

cat and struck like chain-lightning. Before the outlaw had his blade poised there was a dull crash, and he went rolling end over end.

Just then was Wau Wing's chance to escape. A short run, a spring into the mesquites, and with his knowledge of the lay of the land he could not have been seen again until he was fairly within the limits of Way Back. The trouble was that he was not half enough scared for his own good. He had sent two men down without their having uttered a sound; he looked for a third victim, and found him.

Near at hand one of the Daisies was so busily engaged tying the limbs of the prostrate Uriah that he had not seen what was going on.

Perhaps he did not want to see, after having heard the captain's order.

The sudden cyclone struck him as it had done the others; and then Wau Wing, having put three men out of the way in about five times as many seconds, leaped to the side of Theodosia and drew his revolvers.

The worst little man in all Way Back could not have done his work more promptly, but the contract was a shade too heavy. As his hand came up Daisy Dan sprang in, caught his wrist, forcing his hand upward, at the same time deftly tripping up his heels.

"Bless my soul, little heathen, you're a hummer from Hummersville, and a bad man from up the creek! Here! Don't kill him; take him along. We need just such a man to cook; and before he's been in camp a week he'll be as good a Daisy as any of you. The unsanctified little villain was using a slung-shot! Tie his hands behind his back, and march him off with the ladies."

In the grip of the captain Wau Wing was perfectly helpless, and he recognized the fact, since he made neither outcry nor struggle, and submitted to having his hands tied and his slung-shot and revolvers taken from him without a word.

"This one's a reg'lar leetle cat," remarked the road-agent who had Serena in charge.

"Got out this hyar pop-gun, an' would 'a' used it fur keeps, too, ef I hedn't been spry. Blame me, ef I don't begin ter b'lieve they'r bad medicine fur us."

"If you're afraid of two women and a heathen Chinee pass in your resignation!" retorted Dan, sharply.

"An' my checks along with it? Eh! No, siree. I'm only a-tellin' ov yer how things war a-workin'."

"I don't just remember asking any questions. When I do it will be time enough to ventilate your suggestions. You're taken in on the ground floor to be spry. You're running heap big risks when you ain't. That's all there is about it. Now, to get out of this."

"One moment, if you please. Of course I understand what this means, I have bought myself out of your hands once; and I suppose I must do it again. But this time I must bargain for more than myself and friend. I was on my way to meet this young man. I do not know yet with any certainty; but somehow I suspect that I may have a peculiar interest in him. Beware what you do to him, for I swear that unless he leaves your hands uninjured, and comes safely into town, not another cent of mine do you see. So help me Heaven! If you harm another hair of his head I'll die in your hands before I give another dollar to such unfeeling wretches. Raise him up tenderly. I believe he is more seriously injured than you think. And I speak for the Chinaman, too. If he has done any injury to any one it has been in my defense; and I will not knowingly desert a friend."

"That's enough. We know your platform now; and we'll stand on it—if convenient. For the present—with you to look after—Uriah is a white elephant, but unless Way Back makes it too hot to hold him he need not come to any permanent harm. Always provided, of course, that you make it of sufficient importance for us to look after him. When we get through with this little set-up I don't think it will make much difference whether or not Uriah takes our trail. But if I couldn't buy you a better brother than he is for half the money he's going to cost you before you get through, I'd go to kingdom glory on a white mule."

"And do you think he is her brother?"

Serena turned upon him sharply, and thrust the question as though it was a sword.

"Oh, glory! I don't know. The family record has not been in my keeping. Any man that will desert such charming society as he evidently had at home, and come out here to work for his board and clothes, must be just such a flat as Sid Campton is supposed to have. That's general principles. Beyond that I know nothing."

"Yet you should. Is he or is he not the young man you and your comrades in crime robbed of ten thousand dollars and threw over the rocks on the road from Hard Luck to Way Back?"

"Oh, Serena!"

Theodosia heard her with surprise and grief—would have stopped her had she known in time what she was going to say.

The interruption was unfortunate. Dan the Daisy was more than surprised at the home question, and might have given a reckless an-

swer had he not had time to reflect. While a lady was speaking or about to speak, he was privileged to keep silence.

But Miss Wild had never taken her eyes from his face, and still insisted:

"I am waiting for my answer."

"Which is your blessed privilege. There's time enough for such nonsense elsewhere; just at present it is time to be making ourselves scarce."

"You think Way Back might give you something to do besides catching inoffensive women, if it was known that you were so near? You are right. Be prudent. If one man could stand off your whole gang, as did Pinnacle Pete, about three would exterminate the clan."

"To Hades with Way Back! We'll give them a rustle to-night—such a rustle as you read about. I'll tell you of it to-morrow, when we've sacked the town. Now, forward!"

The outlaws intended to move, and they moved; the girls and Wau Wing at the point of the pistol, and Uriah in the arms of the brawny road-agents.

CHAPTER XXXII.

MAJOR GAY BUCKS THE TIGER.

THE absence of the young ladies attracted no attention at the Early Dawn until dinner-time.

Possibly it would not have done so then; but to provide for it, a boy brought in a note to the proprietor, written in a flowing, feminine hand, and signed Theodosia Lande.

It simply said that no uneasiness should be felt on account of their absence, as they had extended their walk as far as Sid Campton's, and were being entertained by his sister. If they would probably remain there during the day, since they had unexpectedly met with congenial society.

Very natural all that seemed, and so there was no commotion through the camp—no mass-meeting to express the indignation all felt—as there would have been had not everybody been left to attend to his own business.

At the Mint there was a very full attendance that night, including Eric Rivers.

The judge had taken the chances, and gone out to the Red Rock with Armadel. Theodosia even believed in the story of Uncle Davy, as rehearsed by Dan the Daisy, he doubted if she would or could take any action in the matter at once, and within twenty-four hours the outlaw could act.

"Lightnings blast it! Were it not for those sleuths I might—yes, I would stay, and fight it out from within the lines. If Dan removes them, well and good. I will leave the mine in safe hands—Armadel is the man for that, in spite of what Dan and I said last night—take my departure openly, and then hark back to the Daisies and Miss Theo. If he fails in that I'll take a hand in the red work and risk the mine. Sam could safely try the freeze-out on my wicked partner, while I would scarcely care to meet him if he comes in such dubious company as the Short Sport."

In some such way as that had run his reflections in the early morning, and he had taken Armadel with him, to view the property and receive instructions what he was to do in case of emergency.

The judge too had received a note, but it was not in a feminine hand, and it bore no signature, though he knew at a glance that it was from the Daisy captain. It read:

"Luck by the barrellfull. Corralled the whole herd at the first clatter. Be at the Mint to-night. Take everything easy, no matter what you see, and if there's an explosion, you and your friends be in the way of every one but me. For the present I am safe, where hawk nor hound could follow. Will give you directions when we meet."

"Confound him, what does he mean? After the late racket at the Mint, Paddy will have his corps of heelers under strict discipline, and if he attempts to start a row there there will be a heap more lead than glory going. If I don't take hold and run things as I used to, we'll all come to smash. And I suppose, since he's gathered up a gang of his own, Daniel would kick like a Texas steer on that. I can't blame him, for it stands to reason that we can't both be bosses. I'll be there though, and perhaps give him a word of warning, in time to prevent folly, should I see that it is needed."

He did not think it worth while to explain everything to Specter Sam. He intended to use him in the mine, if necessary, but concluded to trust him as little as possible concerning his plans in regard to the young ladies. Sam accepted the position provisionally tendered without objection, seeming to believe that it was what Rivers had in view for him all the time. He also accepted the hint that he might see strange visitors at the Mint, and that he should keep watch on his tongue, and be careful not to go for the wrong man.

And of course the judge did not go to the Mint alone, leaving Sam out of the account. There were half a dozen men there, who moved at the crook of his finger, and Jack Stevens was their leader. The outside world did not know it; but the reader by this time knows that he had his resources, and that if he preferred using the Daisies in his game for Theodosia, it was

primarily because Captain Dan proposed to take a hand anyhow, and he did not care to trust his heelers in Way Back with that secret, especially when there was danger that his past life was going to rise up against him, and he might want to abandon everything here, and leave no trace behind him.

Supper had been over some time and the judge was just starting out when the stage drove up. There were three or four passengers, and with natural but meaningless curiosity he watched them descend.

Several of them were ordinary enough-looking individuals; but there was one who attracted his attention, a tall, handsome, well-preserved looking gentleman with locks so gray as to be almost silvery, and apparently not far from sixty. He had the somewhat stiff bearing of a military man, and replied curtly to the salutation of John Partridge, and then strode into the house.

"Hungry as a bear, sir," he said, to Partridge, who followed him in. "Let me have supper as expeditiously as possible. Half-starved in this infernal country, sir. Worse than when I rode over it a dozen years ago at the head of my troopers. Show me a room, if you have such a thing. Show me the room, otherwise. Gad, sir! must get some of this alkali washed off. Feel like a perambulating mountain of dirt."

"Sartain. Ther Early Dawn's no slouch ov a hotel. Mebbe you'd like ter wash a leetle ov it out, fu'st. Hev a private demyjohn thet's hard to beat—an' hyar's yer register."

"Set it up, sir; set them both up. Can look at them, anyhow. Ah, this promises well."

Evidently somewhat surprised at the looks of the liquor he continued pouring until his glass was even full. Then after sampling it, he drained it slowly and with the air of a connoisseur.

"I'll take the barrel, sir, at your own price," he remarked, deep satisfaction in his tone.

"Now for the register."

With tolerable distinctness he made an entry:

"MAJ. JOHN GAY, BROOKLYN, N. Y."

Then he looked over the names.

"Ah!" he said, pointing with his finger.

"These young ladies! Are they with you yet? Are they stopping here?"

"So ter speak they be. The'r baggage are here, an' the'r room waitin' fur 'em; but they went out ter Sid Campton's this mornin' an' ain't got back yet. Shell I menshun yer name ef they come?"

"Not necessary; not necessary. They are almost neighbors of mine, know them well. Now, the room, and then supper."

"All right! This hyar way. That infernal Chinyman are out er ther way ag'in. I'll bounce him this time, sure."

"And this Campton that you mentioned, where will I find him?"

"He gin'rally drops 'round to ther Mint S'loon ov an evenin', when he comes ter town. Ef yer don't find him thar you'd better wait till mornin'. Ther road's kinder lonesum, an' ther Daisies hev bin makin' things lively 'round Way Back."

"Um! Heard of them. Infernal scoundrels. Ought to be exterminated. Driver's talked of nothing else all the way down. Give us a rest. Tired, dirty and sick of the subject."

So the military-looking gentleman followed Partridge, made himself presentable, took his supper with an appetite that was undeniably good, lit his cigar, threw his military-looking cloak over his shoulders, and strolled out without taking further counsel of any one.

Eric Rivers, who had only lingered long enough to see him enter the hotel, started in spite of himself when, on looking up, he saw the major at the door. Their eyes met squarely and the stranger stepped forward without hesitation.

"I have been informed, sir, that there was a chance of finding a Mr. Sid Campton here. Can you tell me whether he is in the house?"

"He is not at present, but possibly may be soon, as he calls in quite frequently; though lately he has not lingered as long as usual when he does come."

"Thank you. If there is a chance I can afford to wait. What sort of a man is this Campton, sir? Is he a gentleman; is he a reliable man, sir?"

Rivers laughed.

"As far as I know I should answer yes. We don't know much about him here, as he does not carry his heart on his sleeve; and has not been with us so very long. A pretty clever man, all round, plays a stiff game of cards when he is in the humor, don't seem afraid of anything, and just now is digging a hole that the most of us think will strike China before it does quartz. No telling, though. There's a heap of luck about such things."

"What, sir, is his object in digging that hole if his chance is so slender?"

"Why, the fact is, I suspect he bought a salted claim; and is going ahead on it just as a man backs a losing card right straight along because he thinks luck is bound to turn on it soon."

"Ah, an obstinate gentleman, who will pay

for his experience. A good deal of card-playing in Way Back, is there not?"

From what John Gay could see going on around him he had good grounds for his remark; though Rivers was inclined to understand it as a challenge.

"Considerable, though I must really beg you to excuse me for not offering to furnish you with amusement. I have sworn off."

"Indeed!" said the major, lifting his eyebrows in a way that represented incredulity. "Once in grace always in grace. You will begin again. Meantime I scent faro in the distance. What sort of a game do they deal here; and is it heavy enough to justify a gentleman wasting his time over it?"

"I don't remember any one ever exhausting the capital of the bank, which I believe is limited to five thousand; but Billy Morgan, the gentleman at the box, is considered to be a square little sport. He attends strictly to business and has hosts of friends—the more, perhaps, because it has been discovered that he is an uncomfortable man to crowd. Yet if he had been suspected of playing advantages the men of Way Back have nerve enough to make the charges."

"Very well then, very well. I will fill in a little time while I wait. Should Mr. Campton come in would you kindly point him out?"

The two men moved up to the table together, and the major bought his chips and proceeded to business in a way that showed him to be not altogether a novice.

His appearance had already attracted attention, and his game was watched with some curiosity.

Billy Morgan acknowledged his presence by a nod and laid off card after card with the usual cold smile on his face; but the major showed such strong signs of eagerness and temper that he was set down as one who played for excitement rather than profit.

And the major, from the very start, played a leading game. Now and then he hit the right card; but it was seldom. For several deals he was a steady loser; and he bet with more and more recklessness as luck became pronouncedly against him.

"Five hundred on the turn," he said sharply. "Deuce, ace, and the king in the box."

"So you think," said Billy, looking quietly around to see if there were any more bettors. "One guess is as good as another till we know different. Are you all done?"

And when no one responded he pulled the cards more like a machine than ever, while he muttered.

"Deuce, king, and the ace, in the door. Bank wins."

"A moment, sir, if you please. Will you kindly pull that ace forward just a trifle?"

The major was quivering all over, but Billy only answered by giving the ace a shove with his thumb.

The act seemed mechanical—and also unfortunate.

Behind the ace lay a duplicate king of hearts.

"Ah, ha! you robber, robber, robber!" shouted the major, whipping out a pair of revolvers, and covering Billy's head.

"You have cheated me, sir, all the way through. Give me back my money instantly, or die!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE BIG RACKET AT WAY BACK.

BILLY MORGAN was the coolest man in the room. The revolvers were very close but he did not wince, nor did he try to draw a weapon. There was one right at his hand, but under the circumstances it was three to one that the stranger had the best of it, all around, and that if he shot the dealer the latter was all paid for.

"Put up your pop-guns, old gentleman, and talk a little sense. You are a stranger in the camp, while I am pretty well known here. You can't make any of them believe that I play a skin game. The men of Way Back would rather swear that you had been putting up some sort of a game, yourself; and got left."

"Cannot they believe their own eyes? Who of them has ever gone away ahead of the game? Convicted cheat. I want my money back, or I will shoot you while you sit."

"Don't, pop! You'd only muss the floor up and not a cent would you ever see. Come outside if you want to use your barkers; and I'll bring mine. We'll just have an elegant time. We'll make that street swim in gore."

"Ah! You would make fun of me. I should shoot you where you sit, but I can afford to wait. Inside or outside, it makes but little difference to me so that I have my money and revenge!"

"Whist, there, ye bloody spalpeen!" shouted a new voice. "Git out ov this, er it's yer skin Oi'll be afther crackin' wid this swate bit ov a switch."

Paddy Milligan had noted the scene from a distance. Now he was flourishing a club as big around as his arm.

"Yes, out with you. I'll put you to bed tucked in with a lead blanket," shouted Billy Morgan. "It's your game or I don't know when a sanded deck has been wrung in with an armstrap."

And then Billy rose quietly.

There was a wonderful amount of excitement in the room, the larger portion of its occupants being with Morgan, and when it began to look as though a duel was going to be the result there was more of a flutter than ever.

"Come on, Paddy. Bring the tools and give us the send-off. The gentleman says pistols for two and I never make a deal that I wasn't ready to back that way."

"Will you arrange?" asked the major, turning to Judge Rivers.

"Certainly, sir, if you don't demand too much punctilio. If you are anything of a shot the hour is as good as noonday, and I think I can assure you that there will be no unfair advantage taken. You will have to run your chances, though. Billy is a dead-shot and will try to kill."

"Don't be concerned, sir. If he is a fancy shooter, so much the better. When he comes to meet a gentleman that understands the business he may be nowhere. The very fact of his being a convicted cheat whom I might have shot down like a mad dog, will unsettle his nerves."

"Don't gamble on that; Billy has no nerves to unsettle. And if he had he would be too raving mad to be bothered with them. You've got a sharp eye, though. No one in this camp ever dropped to it that he was using a spring box."

"Tut, tut! They're all spring boxes. Never saw one that wasn't. But we'll talk all that over after I've potted my man. Arrange it; any way you choose."

A little apart from all the rest stood Major Gay, with his military cloak wrapped around him, the observed of observers, while Rivers conferred with Paddy Milligan.

The saloon was thoroughly emptied of all its visitors and most of its attaches. Such a sudden clearing out had seldom been seen; for every one was interested in the duel, which was a great deal more comfortable to witness than the average promiscuous riot, where bullets were prone to fly very wild.

Although Billy had dropped his man more than once, and was a bad man among the wicked, there was very little odds going. Something about the major, stranger though he was, said he was dangerous. After it was once arranged that they were to meet, his cool, silent way was as perfect as that of Morgan.

"All right," said the judge, coming back.

"Paddy will place his man in the middle of the road, below there, and you will take your station over yonder. That will be about thirty paces. They wouldn't agree to any frills; so when I discharge my revolver you are both at liberty to cut loose, any way you choose with this proviso, that if any outsiders are hit the balance are at liberty to take a hand."

"Perfectly satisfactory—anything is satisfactory so that we get to business. Point out my position."

The judge led his principal to the center of the street, and placed him facing Billy Morgan.

"You have two revolvers, have you not, and you are satisfied to use your own tools?"

"I would not carry them if I was not."

"Then keep your ears open and your wits about you. I might say that my sympathies are with Billy, but I shall do my whole duty by you."

"That's all right, Lucifer. And if you hear the highest old racket this side of Texas walk the other way, and strike for the Cave of the Winds."

"The devil!" exclaimed the judge.

"Don't give me away," responded the major, in a low tone, that unmistakably belonged to Dan the Daisy.

"Keep cool and let things settle. Join me soon. Everything is in the corral, and you can pick your cattle. Now, go."

Without another word the judge turned and strode away toward the sidewalk.

"All ready!" he shouted.

And then the sharp crack of his own revolver echoed on the night air.

At the signal there were two other reports following each other so quickly as almost to blend. Billy Morgan winced, staggered and settled down to the ground in a sitting position; but those who were watching his antagonist saw him drop at the flash, and remain stretched out. So motionless was he that more than one thought the ball was over.

Just in time to check the rush for the fallen men he was seen to rise a little, and thrusting his weapons forward begin a fusillade that looked very much as though he was firing at random. First came a couple of shots, then an interval, then more shots, as fast as he could work thumb and finger, until a dozen had been fired. Altogether there was noise enough for a small army to have made; and the citizens of Way Back were worked to the highest pitch of excitement when there came a variation not down on the programme, as they understood it.

Around the corner of the Mint came a little squad of horsemen, half a dozen in number. Who they were, how they came to be there, was a mystery. They dashed straight toward where the military gentleman was lying and as they neared him it could be seen that they had with them a led horse.

Up from the ground sprang the recumbent man, vaulting into the saddle without perceptible slackening of the speed of the party, which swept away at a great rate.

There was a calm such as precedes the storm, and floating back came a laughing voice.

"Ha, ha! How is that on Way Back? With the best compliments of Dan the Daisy! Sold again!"

Then there was a hubbub of voices, and as about every one was armed the crowd ran along the sidewalk—or what went under that name—and began to shoot, though Paddy Milligan and a few others hurried out to where Billy Morgan had settled down, in a half-comatose condition.

"Enter the house wid him!" exclaimed Paddy, "an' we'll see how bahd he's plugged. Sure, an' no one kin till out here in ther darruk. Lift him jontly, though. An' it's that thafe ov ther worruld 'ud be lyin' here ef Oi'd had ther sinse av a goose. Wan poult av me cloob, an' Oi'd hev sittled it all, an' saved poor Billy."

Billy was in a bad way; but it might have been worse.

He had been struck twice. A ball had hit him fairly in the thigh, another had grazed the side of his head.

Fortunately Doctor De France was at hand, and took hold in an experienced way, that gave him a very good chance to pull through. The doctor was not only an expert, but an enthusiast in gunshot wounds, so that he was not diverted from his occupation when every one else rushed to the bar at the sound of a deep groan from behind it.

Investigation showed the bartender and his assistant, in whose charge the room had been left, were lying in a heap. Each of them had been knocked senseless, and then bound and gagged.

"Phat the divil?" exclaimed Milligan, as he hastily looked around.

His suspicions were realized all too soon. The safe door stood wide open, and the iron box was as empty as it was when it came from the maker.

Though called a safe, the article was more properly a chest, secured by a lock that opened and shut by the turning of a large iron key.

It only took a moment to discover the absence of its late contents, and another to understand the nature of the plot.

When nearly every one left the saloon to witness the duel, the Daisies had boldly made their attack, opened the safe, abstracted its contents, and sprung out of a window. Mounting on the horses they had waiting for them, they had picked up Captain Dan and made good their escape. The whole thing was premeditated, because the safe had been opened without injury to it, and Paddy Milligan had his own key in his pocket.

"An' sure it's not me own money that's ther botheration, but the money that war left wid me for safe-keeping. How shall I iver look ther joodge in the face, ter say nothin' av ther rist, an' ther Short Sport, av he comes? A thousand dollars is riddy to ther mon as brings ther spoils back!"

The liberal offer was of no use, however.

The dropping shots had long since ceased, and the citizens—more ashamed than they were ready to confess—came wandering back, talking of pursuit, but no one showing a lead. Had they been able to see Dan the Daisy and his men just then they would have seen a more disgusted looking party than could be found anywhere else, even at Way Back.

"That was a daisy racket," began Dan, as he drew in his steed.

"Before we go any further, Jimsey, suppose you turn over the spoils. I can hear 'em howl when they know the big pot isn't in Paddy Milligan's chest."

"Take it easy, captain," responded the driller.

"Bluff they were playing, wasn't it? And the biggest kind of a bluff it was. Some one's got the stakes, for here's the whole boodle, and it don't pan out a thousand dollars. I brought the old hat along to see what kind of stuff Paddy keeps in his vaults."

Milligan's hat was filled with paper and a few pieces of quartz. What the idea was in that Dan the Daisy could not imagine, and did not try. Like another historical gentleman, he stood in the middle of the road and swore at large.

After a little of this soul-satisfying exercise he drew a long breath, and was another man. He gave a few brief orders, and sent the rest scurrying along the road. Then he drew from a saddle-pouch a set of mufflers, which he fastened on his horse's feet, and then turned sharply aside and pursued his journey alone.

At that moment there was but one pair of eyes on him, but they were sharp ones.

They belonged to Specter Sam.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

WAU WING AS A SHEET-ANCHOR.

DAISY DAN had spirited away Theodosia and the rest of his captives so neatly that no sign of trail was left behind, by which they could be followed, had they been missed and sought for. He had evidently moved his quarters to the

regions lying on the opposite side of Way Back, and the young ladies found themselves in altogether a new country, though this second lurking-place was very little different from the first.

It may have been that it was on account of Theo's threat, or the captain of the road-agents may have had some other motive; but Uriah was treated with all the tenderness that circumstances admitted of. As the outlaw had said, he was not seriously injured. That is, the ball had not bitten deep, and the Daisy would have been up and about in an hour after the same amount of injury.

Uriah took his time to it, and when he did recover his consciousness, he looked around him with a vacant sort of stare, not seeming to recognize either the young ladies or the road-agents.

Wau Wing had wits for four, if any judgment could be formed from the way his beady little eyes roved around, and it was big odds that when he saw the intricate and dangerous road again, he would know it.

The lane into which they finally turned was not so distant from Way Back to one who knew the route; and yet it was ten to one, or any other odds, almost, that it would never be found.

"This time, ladies, we will have to work the mine for all it is worth. Pity for you that you didn't take warning and evacuate before we had a chance to set up this second game."

"Yes. Pity it was that we did not suspect that you had less honor, less principle, less manhood than even the average ruffian!" snapped Serena. "When we had paid you your price once that should have made us safe from you for all time."

"But it didn't, my child," laughed Dan. "Next time so nominate it in the bond, and don't expect more than we promise. I see you are in a very unsatisfactory frame of mind; and I'm not ready for business myself. I'll leave you all to meditation and prayer, and tomorrow we'll agree on terms. I have business in Way Back this evening, and will be pleased to take any messages that you have for your friends. Nothing to say, eh? So-long. I'll see you later."

He left them to their own devices—but under the charge of a double guard. No getting away this time for Uriah, for he and Wau Wing were handcuffed.

They were huddled in a small cavern, one side open to the air, the outlet being a narrow passageway that led right down along to a little plateau on which the band was camped, a dozen strong. Two men had charge of this avenue, while in the prison-chamber itself, squatted a raw-boned, snaky-eyed, black-skinned Mexican woman. She glared at them with no friendly look, and fingered the knife in her belt at intervals, staring at them in a way that set Serena's teeth on edge, as she said in a whisper. The hag had also a pair of serviceable-looking revolvers; and would apparently have been guard enough of herself if she had a relief, as did the others.

Uriah went off in a corner and seating himself, dropped his chin into his manacled hands and looked, as he usually did under adverse circumstances, the very picture of despair.

Theodosia was excited, was despondent, was almost everything that a reasonably brave young woman could be under the circumstances; but she was not forgetful of her mission, nor of the half-formed idea that she was ashamed to acknowledge as a suspicion.

She went over to him quietly—looked at him searchingly. Then, in a low tone:

"Tell me truly, young man, who are you? Are you, can you be, Rolland Lande?"

"G-g-go 'way frum me!" shouted Uriah, throwing up his hands. "I w-w-wish Sid Campton 'd run his own weemin. G-g-go 'way!"

"Answer me truly. I am your friend—perhaps more. But I must have this suspense settled. Who are you? Where did you come from?"

"I'm Uriah Snodgrass, from Boston w-w-way. I d-d-don't know no Landes, an' I d-d-don't w-w-want ter. G-g-go 'way or I'll h-h-hurt yer! I'll stomp on yer w-w-with b-b-both feet!"

Then he again put up his hands sulkily to his face and had nothing more to say.

The last doubt of Theo was removed. This was not her brother, anyhow. She turned from him to Serena.

"I've had enough of adventure, dear, and when we get out of this I'm willing to go home and leave the mystery to others to solve that can do it with less danger. I don't care who else this young man is, he is not Rolland, and I doubt very much if he will be able to give us any real assistance. We must trust to the length of my purse."

"However long it is there's a bottom somewhere. We are in more danger than I like to think of. If Pinnacle Pete, of whom we have been hearing everything and seeing nothing, is going to do anything, now is his chance. How is it, Wau Wing? Do you think he is going to be around?"

The Chinaman grinned, and rolled his eyes sideways till they rested on the Mexican woman squatted at the point of exit.

"Wau Wing no hap got one piecee t'inkee in-

side w'at tim' he cohom, but he be longey bimby, soon. Glil dly uppee. Nochin-chin. Keep he eyes open, mout' s'ut. Wau Wing takee cake. Sabbe? Eh, ch'ho?"

Everybody seemed to want silence, and silence they had. The hours passed slowly; but, all the same, they passed. They had supper; eaten in silence by some, not at all by others. A curtain of darkness was let down in front of the cavern; and a fire was kindled in one corner. In another the Fool of Way Back snored loudly; near him Wau Wing seemed to be sleeping soundly, while Theo and her friend lay on the only bed the room afforded, their arms clasped around each other, now and then whispering softly until they, too, fell asleep.

Something awoke Serena.

The fire was low, and their prison was full of shadows. She looked around her and saw the Mexican woman stealing past her, a knife in one hand, a revolver in the other.

From Uriah's corner there were groans and gnashing of teeth. Perhaps he had the nightmare—it might be something else. The grenadier-like female was going to investigate.

As she stooped over him Serena saw another shadow, and heard another sound. Wau Wing hurled himself at the hag like a panther, struck like a prize-fighter, and sent her down like lead. In his hand he held a rock, and he used it for what it was worth. She scarcely gave a moan, and he had her bound and gagged in a jiffy.

Serena started up, but uttered no cry. She understood that the Celestial had slipped the handcuffs from his wrists and disposed of the woman, but to what good? They could not fly away.

Wau Wing came gliding to their bedside.

"Glil wantchee tly, blake he neck one piecee so fashion. Glil stay heah, Wau Wing fetchee Pinnacle Pete. You sabbe?"

"Are you going to desert us? Cannot you take us with you?"

Wau Wing shook his head.

"He no desult. He come mau-mau. He maskee much bobbely! He steallo one piecee lope, he climb down lockee. T'at glil no can do; t'at Wau Wing can do. He olo hand at tlapeze. Him climb 'way uppee. Girley go sleep, see notting; t'at be how—tak-tsei—belley good. So-longee! You no belongee how fashion Wau Wing waillo. You be allo lightey 'nother tim'. Hi-yah!"

And Wau Wing stole away to the edge of the rocky floor, and vanished over the ledge.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE CONTENTS OF MILLIGAN'S CHEST.

PERHAPS Rivers made the mistake of his life when he failed to keep a closer watch on Specter Sam. The fact was, the judge had barely suspected that under the guise of Major Gay might be found Pinnacle Pete—and that, notwithstanding what Dan the Daisy had told him. When the mask was thrown off, no one was more surprised than he. His attention to the little game made him oblivious of his friend, who was left to his own devices, and putting together what he saw and what he had known, Armadel had already, beyond a reasonable doubt, solved one question. Before long he was satisfied on another.

There was much loud talk and a good deal of desperate language at the Mint as he entered. Every one was sampling Paddy's extract of corn, and for once the proprietor was as bad as the rest.

Mildly as he had championed the fictitious major, there was considerable talk about the judge, and though there were plenty to take up for him, Milligan was especially bitter.

"Looks as though there was going to be a revolt here. One-man power is good enough for the man, as long as it lasts; but when the other men begin to kick there's the deuce to pay. Wonder where the bold Eric is?"

Armadel got that far in his thoughts, as he looked around; and then an idea dawned upon him.

"It's the Red Rock to a cake of soap that he's gone out to join Dan. Heavens! I'll have to be moving. Dollars to dimes they have the girls again!"

He had heard the story that the ladies had gone out to Sid Campton's, and had not doubted it; but now he suspected something else.

To the Early Dawn he hurried. Partridge had been listening to the story of the trouble at the Mint; nearly every one else about the house was around helping him to digest it. It was not hard to find out that the ladies had not returned, and that Wau Wing was still missing.

"Heavens! I'll go out to Campton's myself, if I can find the way," he thought, and he turned back again, toward the Mint.

As he approached he saw a squat-looking figure swaggering through the doorway, and hastened his steps, for he had recognized the Short Sport.

"Hyar I be!" shouted the latter, paying no attention to what was going on through the room, but drifting straight to the bar.

"Set 'em up, Paddy! Set 'em up five fingers deep, and then trot out that poker party ez war 'round ther other night. I've got a power ov 'orney frum Sairey an' we'll settle up on that

game an' mebbe start a fresh 'un, a big 'un, a roarin' one, fur heaps an' keeps."

"Pardon me, but just a word."

Sam Armadel, sliding through the crowd in his wake, touched him lightly on the shoulder.

He wheeled and recognized Sam on the instant. As one of that poker party he had inquired for he could scarcely help but listen to a few whispered words.

"Dan the Daisey raked ther pot, yer say? Hould me Dennis, Oim kilt ontirely! Lead me out an' I'll start on ther war-path. After that I'll get no satisfaction here!"

Milligan would have detained him for an explanation, but without listening, he seized Armadel's arm and strode away, until, at the door, Sam stopped him firmly.

"See here. Before you go a step further just you understand that it's big chances three or four men are laying for you outside. I've no objections to walking down the street with you; but keep your eyes open. When they begin to shoot I'll begin to dodge."

"Let them shoot," was the savage retort. "If the judge's heelers come for me I'll begin to murder them. I only wish I could meet him. You sure he has left town?"

"Just as sure of it as I can be of a thing I didn't see. He has slipped off in the racket. But this is not the place to talk."

"You're right, if it's all true. We'll know before very long."

He started away again, Sam walking by his side, and keeping a sharp lookout around him.

That he had made no mistake was proved even sooner than he expected. There was a flash, followed by two more, and the ping of bullets; but the Short Sport was already down. He had seen the lurking shadows a second before, and thrown himself forward, pulling Sam with him as he touched the ground, beginning to shoot at the flashes.

Three shots he fired, and then sprung to his feet.

"Come on. There's no use to look after my work; it's always done clean. They'll never shoot again."

Armadel saw the crumpled heap dimly visible, and shivered in spite of himself. Of the old league of five he was the one who avoided bloodshed. He had never shot a man save in self-defense. He leaped to his feet and followed some little distance. Then he spoke again:

"It is folly to waste time. I know as well as if I had been told where to find them. Dan the Daisy has started for the 'Cave of the Winds,' and Rivers is to meet him on the way. There are probably not more than half a dozen of the agents there. The rest are laying a false trail. With such shooting as that you would scarcely fear a dozen. By morning they may be off and away."

"I understand—and I know the spot. There are very few spots around here that I do not know as they. Come. I have horses. We will follow them."

"Agreed."

"I've been at Hard Luck hunting for truth. Found it, too, by the bucketful. I'd give a thousand if Lucifer Lightning had half an hour's less start."

"Ah, you know the old name?"

"Yes, Specter Sam, and a good many of the old secrets. That's the reason I'm trusting you. They tried to kill you once—so you suspected—and now you are going to get even. Rest easy. Eric Rivers has played his last game."

"Perhaps; but I hope he don't suspect it. They might make awful work before we get there."

"Have no fear. We will be in time."

It seemed strange to Armadel to hear the man speak so confidently, but all the same he was right.

Dan had traveled slowly until met by the judge, and as the trailers were moving free and fast they were gaining rapidly, and both parties were likely to reach the Cave of the Winds, or its neighborhood, before morning.

"Something like old times," remarked Dan, changing the subject as they turned into a canyon among the hills.

"Pays about as well as anything if you know when to stop. Have most too big a gang for profit, and it takes a wholesale grocery and provision store to keep the grub up till the campaign is over. But we'll disband now till the chest gets empty. That's a wrinkle I learned from you. Start again with half a dozen of the picked men that I'll keep track of. I'm going to get even with Paddy yet. Where do you suppose he hid that pot?"

"That's cool talk considering that he was only protecting my interests. You know why the money was left in that shape—and that I never abandoned my claim."

"Don't fight about it—I didn't get it. It strikes me that as a bait it was working both ways. That's what's holding you to Way Back now. To thunder with your mines when you've got all above ground to work on!"

"Hist! Go slow! Yonder!"

The judge suddenly interrupted and pointed. Among the rocks there was a faint flicker and glow, as though of a small fire.

Dan looked upward and around.

"Queer, that! None of my boys there; must be some one camped. If so, they must go under. Looks infernal suspicious. Some one sneaking round the back door. Stay here and I'll scout around and see. Lucky we came this way. Have your irons ready, for if it's needed you're bound to chip in."

They were drawing nearer as he spoke, and the Daisy pushed on, his pistols in his hands. The spot was well known to him, though he had not visited it for some time, and he knew just how to approach. Rivers, in spite of his order, left the horses behind, and followed at a little distance.

He saw Dan peer cautiously over a jutting rock, and then bound like a tiger upon a lonely figure sleeping by the waning fire.

"Heavens an' earth!" exclaimed Dan, as the judge came rushing up to his side.

"It's that blamed slippery Chinaman of yours. I had him cooped up there, safe enough, with the rest of them; how in blazes did he get away, and what's he doing here? And has he yanked the rest out through the same hole? It's time this gang broke up. I'd have to do some lively killing. Here, you! What you doing here?"

The Chinaman, rudely awakened, was yelling with pain and terror.

"Don't hu't Wau Wing, him leg bloke all uppee. Him tumble down locks. Him waillo faddah t'at him no can do."

"A healthy old tumble that. At least half a mile," muttered Dan, looking up at the cliffs above.

"And scrape my soul with a hay rake, if he ain't heeled! Here! Let's see what he's got. Hades! What's this? Chinese, where did all this come from? Speak quick or go up the flume!"

No wonder the road-agent was surprised. There were more funds about the Celestial than if his pockets had been the vault of a bank—especially after the cashier had taken his summer vacation.

"By heavens!" interrupted the judge.

"There's something strange about this. I recognize some of those bills. He's captured the pot that was in the safe at Paddy's. Now, where did he get it?"

There was suspicion in the judge's tone.

"We'll now quick, or there's be a dead heathen. Chirp, young man, or die."

The Celestial howled:

"Wau Wing he hop see Shlot Spoltee. Shlot Spoltee say 'him walkee. Wau Wing walkee. He see Millikan chesey full impti cashee, hop got too plenty tolla inise. Wau Wing got largey piecee tolla, t'en lun away. Fail ovely lock, hult he leg, sit light heah. What for Melican man so teet-meen how fashion so iron face? You belongee too muchee bad heart. You ketchee much piecee tolla, why you so sassy, galow?"

"Do you mean to say that you robbed Milligan's chest?"

"So me talkee."

"I'll be hanged! How did you get away from the boys, and where's the girls and the Fool of Way Back?"

"Wau Wing no undlestadee. Him lun away fion Way Back. He no see glils; he no see Foolo fion Way Back. Him allo lonee."

"We're wasting time here, Dan. Drag him along, and find out the balance when we know the rest are safe. These Chinese thieves would steal the lashes off of a dog's eye while he winked, and the cur would never see him. At all events, we have the money, and it's a haul."

"Right you are; but he'll steal no more. He and the gentle Uriah swing together, when we get to the bottom of things. And we won't quit now till we're there. Come up, heathen. The rope is waiting."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

PINNACLE PETE GETS THERE, WITH BOTH FEET.

THEODOSIA slept serenely, and Uriah was left alone to struggle with his nightmare. Miss Wild was busy with her own thoughts, and did not care to waken them. After a time she heard a low gurgle, and a faint noise of struggling, showing that the Mexican woman had recovered her senses.

Wau Wing had done his work effectually, however, and gradually the useless struggles ceased. Listening for their renewal, and to Theo's regular breathing, Serena fell asleep again, and did not awaken until there was a fall of footsteps along the rocky floor, and the sound of several masculine voices.

She was wide enough awake then, and found Theodosia sitting up by her side, staring wildly around, a good deal excited and bewildered.

"It is all right now, Serena, I heard his voice. The judge has come and will take us away from this horrible place."

"Young lady," said Dan the Daisy, "will you please be quiet? There's a little preliminary work to be done here before we attend to your case. You don't go out of here a single woman. That much is certain. A lady of your worth and wealth that can't take better care of herself must have a legal protector; and I think you will have the chance to pick from several elig-

ible candidates. You can be digesting that while we are gone. We must settle first with the charming Uriah, but that won't take more than a minute. Here, you!"

After a kick like that the Daisy bestowed, even the Fool of Way Back could not well be sleeping very soundly. He sprang to his feet and glanced around.

"Just follow us, young man. The court is waiting, to see why your neck should not be elongated."

He marched the young man out, down the ledge, and into the general camp, where the fellows were all collected, and the Mexican woman, released from her bonds, was staring about. As Sam had explained, there were only half a dozen of the outlaws there. Dan had arranged to temporarily disband the Daisies, and had sent the rest away to lay a false trail. There were enough here for ordinary purposes, such as keeping guard during the retreat which the captain had planned.

"There's nothing like getting rid of odd jobs when you have them on hand. There's a certain law in our little commonwealth that says when one of the Daisies turns his toes up the causes are to be inquired into, and if any man is found to be the cause, near or remote, that man is to be planted likewise."

"We have before us here a youth about whom not much seems to be known. Sometimes I think him a blamed good man—and sometimes I think him a bigger fool than he even gets credit for."

"But this thing seems certain. He is a handy man with the tools; and he dropped poor Tom Hall for permanent investment and seriously injured several other friends of ours. Whether, under such circumstances, he is or is not a detective makes little difference. Under the case as stated he could deserve nothing more if he was a dozen Pinnacle Petes, all rolled into one. Unfortunately, I am only acquainted with that distinguished gentleman by reputation, and unless Uriah decides to open up down to the bed rock I do not see that we can get a much more definite idea of who he is."

"But Pinnacle Pete, or the Fool of Way Back, what's to be done with him? Altogether, now; and speak it loud."

"Death!"

They spoke so nearly together that the word seemed to come from the lips of one man rather than those of half a dozen.

"Very fairly done; one more question. How?"

"The rope!"

"Good again. And now, to finish up the business of this court as a court, here's this infernal Chinaman. He goes along with him, without saying; but I'd like to know just how his little games are to be explained. Brigada was knocked senseless by him; but was Uriah an active accomplice? And how does he come to have the contents of Paddy Milligan's safe in his pockets?"

"No rope for him, the vile thief!" exclaimed the Mexican woman, striding forward.

Heretofore, since her release, she had not spoken a word, not even to Captain Dan, when, first of all, he set her free.

"My knife shall let out his red heart's-blood. I, Brigada, would ask it!"

"If it's any satisfaction you can have him, if you don't let him get away. I did think of throwing in a few extra trimmings for the sake of example; but, no matter. Now, Uriah, do you want to give us a little information, or shall we send you over the range at once?"

"B-b-but I d-d-dunno what y-y-you mean," stammered Uriah. "I m-m-missed ther s-s-s stage an' d-d-didn't g-g-get ter Way Back t-t-till ther f-f-fun war over."

"Tell that to the marines. Brigada, get your knife ready, and Johnny, bring out the rope. One minute for them to talk, and if they've nothing to say, over they go!"

Johnny and Brigada were as coldly matter-of-fact as were the tones of the captain. The rope was around the neck of Uriah, and the knife already drawn. Even the two guards, though they stood on the pathway, were devotedly listening.

"Now!"

Captain Dan saw that all things were ready, and waved his hand.

At the same time there was the sound of two quick blows, as the sentinels went down; and then two figures sprang into the open, with pistols raised and ready. First came the Short Sport, and at his shoulder was a duplicate edition of Wau Wing!

"Hands up! I'm a man of the law—ah!"

At the challenge, Dan the Daisy reached for his pistols, and he reached like lightning, but a shade too slow.

Without seeming to take aim the Short Sport pulled trigger, and with a crash the outlaw captain fell to the floor. Then, while his comrade's pistols were talking at a great rate, he sprang at the judge, and bore him down.

"I've got you, Eric Rivers, for the murder of Abner Gates; and to-morrow I'll have the Red Rock, for I'm Roland Lande, Eric Rivers, and the man you tried to murder."

And still he shot with his free hand.

A scream from behind him told that Theo-

dosia heard him through all the noise—and believed at last.

"Go back, Miss Lande! This is no place for you," shouted the other, as he dropped the last of the standing outlaws.

"Your detectives are very much around; but there may be more of the outlaws in the bush."

The clothing of the speaker was like to that of the Simon-pure Wau Wing, but the voice was the voice of Millie Vandeleur, the lady detective.

"G-g-got thar with b-b-b-both feet, as u-usu'l," chuckled Uriah, as the rope dropped from his neck. "I d-d-didn't g-g-give yer away, M-m-missus Campton."

"Many thanks, Uriah," replied the duplicate Wau Wing. "You're an awful fool, but you have a heap of nerve, all the same."

And then she turned to Theodosia, who was staring at her in a bewildered way.

"Yes, my dear, it is Millie Vandeleur that was—Mrs. Rolland Lande that is, though at Way Back we pass as Sidney Campton and sister. As soon as Rolland finishes tying up the slightly wounded he'll have a greeting for you."

"The Short Sport?" gasped Theo.

"Yes, and Pinnacle Pete, Jehu Jones, Uncle Davy, Sid Campton, the Fool from Way Back, and a dozen others as the occasion demanded. Fortunately we were here, hunting down these men, and Rolland found out the judge's game after it had fairly started. He still lacked evidence about the murder you heard him mention, but obtained it to-day in Hard Luck, and so could draw the long trail to a close. Strangely enough, we had been hunting Rivers everywhere but here. But here is your brother. He can tell you more."

He came forward, having finished tying the judge.

"Yes, my dear. You said in one of your letters to that fraud, that you would come, anyhow, since you yearned for adventure. I think you have had enough to last you the balance of your life—considerable more than I intended you to have. Fortunately I got a chance to see those letters, and provided accordingly. I sent Uriah to Coronado as a blind, and Millie went down on horseback. Then I came back ahead, and when I found that the agents had Uriah I went out and exchanged places with him, for I learned the secrets of their retreats when, as a boy, I was prospecting here; and have explored them, in company with Millie, since. I would have got you all away if Rivers had staid out of the game, but I wanted to give him rope."

"But, oh, Rolland, why have you kept silence all these years? If you had only written!"

"I did write till I was tired of it, and concluded that you had dropped me to get the old gentleman's fortune. And I didn't want to interfere until this old gang developed the size of their hand."

His sister was holding his hand now, staring at him, trying to trace in this man some resemblance to the fair boy that ran away from home. She gave it up.

"My wife," he added. "Perhaps we can a little further explain the mystery. We have both been in the detective business, and I got a letter from headquarters asking me to look after you in case their other man failed, and sending credentials for myself and wife, separately. That was what started me on the judge's racket, and it proved fortunate all around, as the man from headquarters failed to connect. Well, I tried to get them somewhat in detail—for when I saw the old pards together at Coronado I knew they were all on the same lay—left Durango Dave and Revolver Rube out of the game in the very start, and I've taken in what's left of the Daisies and burst the judge's bubble. Wau Wing was the sharpest of the lot, for when I took him out to my place and put Millie in his stead, at the Early Dawn, after Sally Rice went off the carpet, he skipped the ranch, robbed Milligan's safe, and lit out. Fortunately we'll get a finger in the spoils, and divide that pot according to merit. But the balance of the explanations will keep. We must be getting to Way Back. I'll take the judge and Daniel along, and leave these wounded ruffians and the she-tiger to nurse each other. They are of no great account; but if they are here when the investigating committee comes out it will be exceedingly sultry. That's all. You can stick a pin there and tie a knot."

As Sid Campton, Theodosia found her brother quite a genial gentleman; and she loved his wife on the spot.

She asked Rolland some questions in regard to Specter Sam, whom with a woman's wit when once started, she suspected of having had something to do with Eric Rivers's plot.

"Hem! Your friend Serena is not the most guileless innocent in the world. Mr. Armadel—in spite of his antecedents, is now a detective, attached to an eastern bureau to which she applied for a guide, who would keep himself shady, but be on hand if needed, and assist in their search. It was a little rough on him, to be pitted against his old pards, but he kept his eyes open, looking for Rolland Lande, and dropped to me when the rest did not. He was leading me to the Cave of the Winds when we met Millie, who

had made her escape. We left him on the watch below, and when he was sure that we had made our points he returned quietly to Way Back. Rivers and the Daisy intended to go back on him again, as they did once before, but he did not care to appear too far to the front, when he was not needed. You can see him to-morrow and thank him—I'll pay him. When this thing settles down I'll take you back East myself; but there is going to be a thundering racket before its all over. Way Back can't believe its senses."

A racket there was; but it was altogether to the disadvantage of the plotters. Dan the Daisy recovered from his wound, but received the slow-coming but heavy reward, reserved by a fostering Government for the mighty chiefs among the road-agent's; while Eric Rivers went back to California with the evidence dead against him in the case of Abner Gates. There were a dozen other charges against him; but that one was solid and sufficient.

When, in due course of law, Eric Rivers had been frozen out of the Red Rock, and the mine stocked and sold, it proved an immense thing for Rolland Lande; but he only returned from the East—whither he had escorted his wife and the young ladies—long enough to accomplish this. Then he went back again to the home of his boyhood, where, perhaps, he will some day almost forget the years he flourished as Pinnacle Pete, and the wind-up of his revenge at Way Back, where his sister was so narrowly saved from falling in love with the villainous Rivers.

Uriah is with him still.

"He's my mascotte," laughed Rolland, when Theo asked him what he was going to do with him. "I haven't made up my mind yet whether he's as big a fool as he looks; but I'll keep him for good luck, anyhow."

Specter Sam went back to his detective work in the East. Serena remained with Theo as companion; Revolver Rube and his pard had disappeared when the party reached Coronado; the true Wau Wing having his pockets well lined, continued his flight, and the rest of the characters have not been heard from. But Way Back still goes round on wheels.

THE END.

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